Versing the Ghetto:
African American Writers and the Urban Crisis

By

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This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother

—Marilyn T. Furman—

who brought us up at the end of a street.

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I investigate how African American writers respond to the post-World War II urban crisis through their literary representations of black urban space in the ghetto. While the urban crisis has generally been covered by historians, cultural critics, and social scientists, I argue that analyzing how the work of creative writers fits into these discourses uncovers the critical ways that black working class communities imagine their space and simultaneously critique systems that perpetuate socioeconomic and racial inequality. I add to existing African American literary and cultural criticism by discerning how writer Richard Wright, poet Gwendolyn Brooks, street lit novelist Donald Goines, and rapper Master P resist notions of social pathology, the study of societal problems such as poverty and crime that reinforce disorganization, that was used by social scientists to study black urban life in the early twentieth century. If solely pathology is used to assess black urban life, the urban crisis can only be discussed in terms of how African Americans bear the brunt of these conditions. I contend that a turn to writers working during the urban crisis offers a literary history that reveals how ghetto dwellers have consistently used their own knowledge production to contend with the realities of their social, economic, and political disenfranchisement. Lastly, I argue that like the urban crisis, literary representations of black urban space have rendered how the ghetto has transformed from a place to leave, to a nesting place of potential, to a space to defend against external manipulation, and finally as a culture. In charting a literary history of ghetto representations in twentieth century Africa American literature, *Versing the Ghetto: African American Writers and the Urban Crisis* debunks popular notions that the ghetto is simply an intellectually immobile space.

Introduction

In September 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed the American Psychological Association (APA). In his talk, titled "The Role of the Behavioral Scientist in the Civil Rights Movement," King calls for social scientists to contribute to black liberation efforts by providing solutions to the problems of black leadership, by participating in political action, and by probing the psychological development of blacks who have been subjected to multigenerational forms of oppression. He mentions some of the dangers that social scientists pose, citing as an example sociologist Charles P. Loomis, who in 1967 suggested that black Americans relocate to find an all-black community in South America. Still, King is steadfast in noting that policy makers should be as adamant in following the rules in black communities as blacks have to be in abiding by the law in public spaces. He states:

> The policy makers of the white society have caused the darkness; they create discrimination; they structured slums; and they perpetuate unemployment, ignorance and poverty. It is incontestable and deplorable that Negroes have committed crimes; but they are derivative crimes. They are born of the greater crimes of the white society. When we ask Negroes to abide by the law, let us also demand that the white man abide by law in the ghettos. (181)

King's comments appear in a subsection of his speech that focuses on the urban riots that erupted in black communities throughout the 1960s. In the wake of these social uprisings, social scientists scrutinized black communities through the lens of pathology—a branch of sociology that attempts to uncover the cause of social troubles rather than how societal problems are

overcome—in order to discover the root causes of the black unrest that was causing people to destroy their residential spaces. The "darkness" that King is calling attention to is the tension between the black working class and the state, but more importantly, it represents the way in which the state and social scientists do not take into account the systematic factors—racial discrimination chief among them—that influence black unrest and social disturbances. He recognizes that these actions, which he calls crimes, are predicated on state offences of civil neglect and socioeconomic and sociopolitical disenfranchisement. The crux of King's argument is that the black working class should have as much control over its own residential space as possible, that blacks are capable of maintaining the political reigns required to govern their communities. By attributing agency to the ghetto, King not only suggests that white society provide more nuanced ways for blacks to participate in the body politic of the nation, but more importantly, he is highlighting that blacks should have the political and economic capital to sustain their own communities in the same way afforded to white communities. According to King, these riots must be recognized "as durable social phenomena. […] Urban riots are a special form of violence. They are not insurrections. The rioters are not seeking to seize territory or to attain control of institutions. They are mainly intended to shock the white community. They are a distorted form of social protest" (181). In connecting housing reform to riots, King is underscoring that the need for black autonomous residential communities is a chief concern for the civil rights and liberties of black Americans.

In its entirety, King's APA address hints at what scholars have identified as the urban crisis for the speech's emphasis on locating the disparities in housing, employment, and education among other civil liberties in black communities. The post-World War II urban crisis is defined by increases of intense poverty, the collapse of certain labor economies, high rates of

unemployment, the infrastructural decline of cities, and anti-black state and federal policy changes. While scholars agree on the scope of the urban crisis, they have differing opinions on when it begins in American history. Like any historical concept, the concept of urban crisis has undergone constant transformation, mostly associated with the sociopolitical climate. Tim Weaver argues that the concept emerged in the 1950s when scholars working with a liberal framework indicated that structural problems such as housing conditions and inadequate civic services could be remedied with government intervention. The 1960s saw the failures of governmental initiatives toward "urban renewal." By the end of the 1970s, three discursive components of the urban crisis—race and racism, culture and morals, and the inevitability of government failure—converged to drive the Reagan administration to push for a neoliberal and neoconservative agenda. Those who could not conform to this agenda often experienced welfare cuts, workfare, and incarceration. Marxist perspectives of the 1970s also indicate that the state's efforts to satisfy various capitalist ventures—those of real estate developers in the suburbs, landlords in the city, and downtown corporate leaders—were weakened in the process of trying to maintain social control. The city exploded in violence from these contradictory objectives. In the wake of 1960s urban riots, the state attempted to respond to the demands of the poor while southern white elites who disagreed with these initiatives retracted their support via tax strikes (Weaver 2042, 2048, 2049). However, historian Thomas Sugrue contends that an assessment based on economical and spatial structures suggests that the urban crisis actually began in the 1940s. For Sugrue, the convergence of race, economics, and politics from the 1940s to the 1960s established the fiscal, social, and economic crisis of the 1990s (5).

I cite King's address to locate his intersecting preoccupations with the ghetto, 1960s riots, social science, and the urban crisis—key factors in many African American cultural productions

depicting post-World War II black urban life. Debates around how writers should depict black urban life have been ongoing since the beginning of the twentieth century, well before King's APA address. In many ways, the representation of black urban life is an inspection of the tension between how social scientists use social pathology to depict the black underclass and how the black underclass represents itself. I start this project with King as a way to show that even the social scientists whom King is attempting to move into action have been a part of the literary history of the ghetto. Though the ghetto began to be studied by sociologists at the beginning of the twentieth century, by the middle of the century cultural producers and activists were underscoring how systemic racial discrimination was at play in the ghetto's longevity, and they were more vocal in demanding positive change in black residential areas that socioeconomically benefitted black residents. In 1966, for example, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPPSD) released its Ten-Point Program, which included a demand for equal housing for black people. The demand states:

> WE WANT DECENT HOUSING, FIT FOR THE SHELTER OF HUMAN BEINGS. We believe that if the landlords will not give decent housing to our Black and oppressed communities, then housing and the land should be made into cooperatives so that the people in our communities, with government aid, can build and make decent housing for the people. (Hilliard 75)

More than advocating for adequate housing, BPPSD recognized the value in community-based ownership over housing processes and property. The call for cooperatives indicates, moreover, that BPPSD was interested in establishing some sort of socioeconomic investment in black communities—a form of capital for black residents who had been systematically economically manipulated throughout history and kept from owning property. Ideologies such as this were

dispersed among an urban landscape that influenced writers such as Sonia Sanchez, Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Gil Scott Heron, The Last Poets, Donald Goines, and Tupac Shakur. More than advocating for civil rights, these artists imagine through and beyond the spatial terrain of black urbanity. They exhibit the raw and gritty details of ghetto life, dissect the experiences of single black women, and create work that speaks to the power that the black working class possesses in using the little resources given them to thrive along the margins of society.

As the initial site of black migrant dwelling, the ghetto marks the starting point for constructing how the urban crisis can be envisioned intellectually within African American twentieth century literature and for understanding how it has been varyingly conceived in the American imaginary. Defining the ghetto itself is no easy task, but it also isn't difficult to picture. Like the urban crisis, the ghetto has existed under different conditions throughout history as such things as the slums, the Black Belt, and the hood. And unlike the urban crisis, the ghetto has become a recognizable idea and space within the American imaginary—it lives in everyone's mind as whatever that individual's relationship is to blackness. At its core, the black American ghetto is a product of racially discriminatory practices of both the government and local housing authorities. As Charles Scruggs notes: "While others have moved into ghettos and then out of them, Afro-Americans have remained largely segregated in the cities, southern or northern" (221).

In this dissertation, I add to existing African American literary criticism, cultural criticism, and critical assessments of the urban crisis by centering the ghetto as a crucial site of artistic and intellectual engagement with the urban crisis. Moreover, I discern the ways in which black writers such as Richard Wright, poet Gwendolyn Brooks, street lit novelist Donald Goines,

and rapper Master P have resisted pathological considerations of the black urban experience by scripting how ghetto dwellers have used their own knowledge production to contend with the realities of their social, economic, and political disenfranchisement. A turn to creative writing on the ghetto and the urban crisis allows for two things: first, a better understanding of the contemporary moment through analyses of work produced by people living in those conditions, and second, a greater perspective on urban life in African American literature in the twentieth century. To date, scholarship on the ghetto or the urban crisis has been taken up by historians, social scientists, and social critics. Thomas Sugrue's seminal book, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (1996), is but one amongst a host of scholarly texts on the urban crisis. When this work is not geographically specific, like Sugrue's, it is often an analysis of how intellectuals have talked about the urban crisis and/or the ghetto or how specific ghettos have formed. Some of the initial and more iconic studies include Robert C. Weaver's *The Negro Ghetto* (1948), Kenneth B. Clark's *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (1965), Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership* (1967), Allan H. Spear's *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (1967), Gilbert Osofsky's *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York, 1890-1930* (1968), and Arnold R. Hirsch's *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960* (1983). Most of these books that were published during the 1960s, in the thick of the civil unrest that King describes in his speech, attempt to dissect the charged racial climate that provoked such physical responses from the black masses. The list indicates that the sociopolitical energy of black unrest was so strong in the 1960s that academics were called to reckon with the systemic problems that produced such frustration from the working class. In this dissertation, I argue that reading creative writers as contributors to such urban histories is crucial

for understanding the varying nuances within representations of both the ghetto and the urban crisis.

Because such a tense moment in race relations in the United States enacted such a physical response from city dwellers, it stands to reason that this era would also inspire cultural productions that participated in such sociopolitical critique. However, responses to the urban crisis in contemporary African American literary and cultural criticism continue to be merely referenced or to go unnoticed, and there has yet to be a full analysis of how these contributions themselves comprise a cohesive history. Cultural producers—writers, visual artists, filmmakers, musicians, and theatre artists—are rarely mentioned in these conversations unless they have produced nonfiction or editorials. Daniel Matlin attempts to bridge this gap in *On the Corner: African American Intellectuals and the Urban Crisis* (2013). Working primarily with historical methods, Matlin traces how three figures—psychologist Kenneth Clark, writer Amiri Baraka, and visual artist Romare Bearden—politically engaged with the urban crisis within their individual careers. Matlin is invested in the trope of the "intellectual," a framework that has been used to highlight the publicness of work—that which is performed in newspapers, speeches, and public events. Though Matlin includes a social scientist and two creatives as intellectuals in their own right, his work is not reflective of the ghetto generally as it is of Harlem, New York specifically. Thus, his work does not highlight other regional accounts of the urban crisis, nor does it situate this work in relation to larger conversations about black urban life. Likewise, in *Ghetto: The Invention of a Place, the History of an Idea* (2016), sociologist Mitchell Dunier constructs a much-needed historical account that connects the black ghetto in the United States to the segregation of Jews both under the Nazi regime during World War II and in sixteenth century Venice. Most of the book focuses on how the ghetto is conceived in the American imaginary, but

it does so primarily through a discussion of Clark, sociologists Horace Cayton and William Julius Wilson, and educator Geoffrey Canada. Creative writers are only mentioned in passing; their contributions to the idea of the ghetto are not thoroughly accounted for.

In many ways, this dissertation is a step toward defining the African American urban narrative, or the post-migration narrative. I frame this work as the aftermath of Farah Jasmine Griffin's notion of the migration narrative because I consider the advent of the ghetto experience in the United States primarily as a Northern phenomenon. In *Who Set You Flowin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative* (1995), Griffin claims that "[f]rom the publication of Paul Laurence Dunbar's *Sport of the Gods* in 1902 to Toni Morrison's *Jazz* in 1992, the migration narrative emerges as one of the twentieth century's dominant forms of African-American cultural production." The migration narrative as Griffin explains it is indicative of the waves of African American Southerners who migrated North to escape racially-motivated violence and pursue better economic opportunities starting around 1910 and lasting well until the 1970s. Expanding on Griffin's work, I explore the urban experience itself in African American literature, whose narrative elements dictate how the first and subsequent generations navigated their urban terrain under racist regimes that appear in different forms than their ancestors faced in the South.

My framing of this project insists that post-World War II representations of black urban life have been molded by an ever-changing urban crisis and have in some way or another been informed by the sociopolitical presence of the black American ghetto. I argue that only by inspecting how writers have been navigating the confines of ghetto walls can we fully unpack the black urban literary landscape. Two works stand out as major contributors to understanding the black urban narrative through notions of the urban crisis. In *Sweet Homes: Invisible Cities in the*

Afro-American Novel (1995), Charles Scruggs is concerned with "the conceptual meeting of utopia and dystopia in twentieth century African American literature" **(**2**)**. Scruggs charts how black writers conceptualize public and private black urban space through a mediation of utopia and dystopia. The study examines how black people are both seen and unseen within the urban landscape and majority culture—invisible yet present. Scruggs argues that the idea of a "visionary city" has always been present in black urban literature and changes from generation to generation. Using the contours of the urban crisis as a historical spine in *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature* (1998), Carlo Rotella provides a convincing assessment of how writers lived and reimagined the urban experience in literature from the 1940s to the 1960s. Yet, Rotella's monograph is not limited to the African American perspective and engages literature from various racial, cultural, and ethnic experiences. Building on these works by Scruggs and Rotella, my dissertation focuses on the ghetto, that portion of a city within the larger city. Though many writers were grappling with the socioeconomic ramifications and politically-charged post-World War II climate that birthed the urban crisis, black writers specifically were concerned with the ghetto, a space that encompassed much of the disparity that the urban crisis imposed on American culture and society. By beginning with the ghetto—the initial site of black life post-migration—my study provides ways of thinking through how the city itself is informed by the black experience.

This interdisciplinary dissertation engages both literature and hip hop as texts that give insight into literary and cultural analysis for two distinct reasons. First, including literary fiction, poetry, urban fiction (street literature), and hip hop in one cohesive study highlights the multigenre approaches with which cultural producers have been intellectually engaging black urban space throughout the twentieth century. I place unlikely subjects in conversation with one

another that have heretofore been critically thought of in exclusive categories. Because some hip hop artists have been inspired by the street literature of Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines, hip hop has inadvertently been exposed to the rich history of African American literature that writers of street literature read and digested. These genres circulate in and through each other. Secondly, the interdisciplinary intervention is crucial to this project because it demonstrates how the ghetto transformed from a space to a culture. In her book, *Ghettonation: A Journey into the Land of the Bling and the Home of the Shameless* (2007), Cora Daniels traces the story of what she considers to be the mindset of "ghetto" as an adjective. Her own definition of the word as it is used in "twenty-first century everyday conversation" includes:

> 1a: behavior that makes you want to say "Huh?"
>
> 1b: actions that seem to go against basic home training and common sense
>
> 2: used to describe something with inferior status or limited opportunity, usually used with so <that's so *ghetto*. He's so *ghetto*.>
>
> 3: a quarter of a city in which members of a minority group live, especially because of social, legal, or economic pressure
>
> 4: common misusage: authentic, Black, keepin' it real **(**1-2**)**

In a project that can be described as popular cultural critique, Daniels attends to the different meanings that have been attached to the word and concept of the ghetto throughout history, displaying the ways in which the ghetto has constantly evolved within the American imaginary. Her definition is important for understanding that discourses of the ghetto exist in two ways: they describe how ghetto dwellers consider themselves through their own knowledge production, or they indicate how notions of the ghetto or what constitutes the ghetto are ascribed to certain behaviors or ideas in American culture more broadly. The latter, as shown in Daniels's fourth

definition, is language that is often code for signifiers of blackness or black people. Thus, reading the ghetto as a site, a lived experience, and a culture is also important for comprehending how within colloquial and formal rhetoric, the words "ghetto" and "urban" themselves become stand-ins for black Americans.

In charting a literary history of ghetto representations in twentieth century African American literature, *Versing the Ghetto: African American Writers and the Urban Crisis* debunks popular notions that the ghetto is simply an intellectually immobile space. If only the lens of pathology is used to assess black urban life, the urban crisis can only be talked about in terms of how black urban dwellers bear the brunt of negative conditions. Nevertheless, as Mitchell Dunier says, "the ghetto remains a useful concept—provided we recall its rich historical background and stop divorcing it from its past" (ix). I argue that creative writers are a vibrant part of this historical past, and analyzing how their work fits into the narratives that have been constructed of the urban crisis will uncover the critical ways that black ghetto residents imagine and critique their space and their socio-economic position.

One key feature of post-migration black urban narratives is that critics were often at odds on how black urban life should be represented in creative works: as expressive arts or as social documents that reflect lived experience. These debates often involved social scientists and much of these critical conversations centered around the usability of creative works within discourses around social issues such as antiracism work and protest. In fact, debates about social science's place in representing black urban life predate the urban crisis and have been ongoing since the beginning of the twentieth century. Alaine Locke, a philosopher and professor at Howard University whose text, *The New Negro* (1925), was crucial to understanding the New Negro movement that preceded the Harlem Renaissance, was a key orchestrator of such debates.

Though trained in philosophy, Locke was well-versed in literature and wrote an annual book review for two magazines, *Opportunity* and later *Phylon,* between the 1920s and 1940s. As an avid and varied reader, Locke was able to review a wide range of books from fiction to books on religion. As his reviews appeared in the moment when blacks were migrating to northern centers where the ghettos were beginning to be formed, much of the literature that Locke discusses is about cities and black urban life. Many of Locke's reviews discuss how African American life was being represented in fiction and in sociology post-migration. For instance, in the January 1933 issue of *Opportunity*, Locke writes:

> Fiction is as bold and revealing as sociology; and at no time have writers, black and white, seemed more willing or more successful in breaking through the polite taboos and the traditional hypocrisies to the bare and naked, and often, tender truth about this or that vital situation of the American race problem.

Conversely, in his 1915 article, "The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the City Environment," sociologist Robert Park argues that "[w]e are mainly indebted to writers of fiction for our more intimate knowledge of contemporary urban life. But the life of our cities demands a more searching and disinterested study" (3). Locke writes against Park's claims, arguing that writers are instrumental in detailing the black experience because they produce unadulterated portrayals. Moreover, Locke insists that these representations of black life are crucial for understanding racial prejudice, a topic that he suggests sociologists have yet to fully grasp in nuanced ways. Later, in the 1948 first quarter issue of *Phylon*, Locke writes: "Our artists increasingly become social critics and reformers as our novelists are fast becoming strident sociologists and castigating prophets." In both of these articles, Locke is concerned with parsing "true" representations of black American life. He sets out to make the case that fiction writers are

just as effective in raising consciousness about race relations in the United States as sociologists, academics who supposedly possess the correct tools and methods by which to accurately measure the human experience. His reference to "the bare and naked, and often, tender truth" is his insistence that realism is integral to this literary rendering. For Locke, then, writers are able to use realism to push through the threshold of creativity to occupy the space of "social critics and reformers." Thus, though "the crisis" at the time of Locke's reviews was not yet the urban crisis, his reviews demonstrate that literary works on black urban life in the twentieth century were often consumed as works of realism.

Still, the most known debate about sociology and the literary depiction of black Americans in the middle of the twentieth century is the subject of Ralph Ellison's "The World and the Jug" (1963, 1964). In this essay, Ellison responds to critic Irving Howe's praise of Wright's *Native Son,* which he feels is more successful than the writing of Ellison and James Baldwin because it is unapologetic in displaying the violence that can erupt from black protest. In "Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Many Thousands Gone," Baldwin wrote against protest as a literary form within African American letters, arguing that the call for protest resulted in perpetuating stereotypes of black aggression. Howe's disagreement with Baldwin is based on the assumption that it is almost impossible for black writers not to write protest literature because blacks have been consistently oppressed in American society. Howe also finds fault with Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man,* because he believes that it appeals more to aesthetics and style than it does to the actual constraints of black life in the postwar United States.

Ellison finds Howe's argument problematic because it privileges pathology over literary criticism based solely on the authors' blackness. For Ellison, to assess black literature through the lens of pathology narrows the scope of black life; it leaves no room for individual experience

within the larger black experience. He warns against reading *Native Son* as a social document, for he believes that literature offers more complex renderings of human life than those that are measured scientifically. Ellison is arguing that using sociological methods to analyze literature, for example, is dangerous because social science leaves little room for considerations of "politics and ideology" that the literature itself assumes. Ellison argues that "American Negro life…is, for the Negro who must live it, not only a burden (and not always that) but also a discipline—just as any human life which has endured so long is a discipline teaching its own insights into the human condition, its own strategies of survival" (112). Ellison argues that black life is also a discipline in the same sense sociology is because there are knowledge productions that are born out of lived black experiences. Moreover, he thinks that it is not beneficial to give privilege to the struggle; it is better to point to the ways in which blacks have beautifully survived in spite of setbacks placed against them.

I find that Wright's depiction of the ghetto, then, differs greatly from the scholars Wright studied because it offers a complex humanity that is not narrowed down into categories that one can inspect from a distance. Wright is able to write about black urban experiences in his fiction because he has worked through them in more organic methods than the Chicago School. Ellison states that "so many of those who would tell us the meaning of Negro life never bother to learn how varied it really is" (108). Variation is key here because it supersedes any notion of a homogeneous black experience. Where Howe suggests that black writers must write about sociopolitical ramifications of systematic oppression because that is the most essential part of the black experience, Ellison points out that there are also beautiful moments within black life that need not go unnoticed or undervalued. In short, Ellison is resisting the label of the "other" that is being placed on black art, which diminishes the complexities of black life in favor of a simple

notion that is perhaps more easily attained by the white reader. This is why Ellison insists that novels should not be treated as "instruments of good public relations" but should instead "arise out of an impulse to celebrate life" (114).

In light of these conversations about how black urban life should be represented in literature, I have chosen to include creative writers in this dissertation who discuss the ghetto throughout multiple volumes of their work and who have at some point lived in the environments to which they are giving voice in order to uncover their individual notions of what E. Lâle Demirtürk calls the ghetto imaginary. Demirtürk contends that the ghetto imaginary is written into African American fiction as a challenge to whiteness, and she critiques the sociopolitical institutions of the American cityscape that control the black ghetto and weakened structure of the inner city. Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Donald Goines, and Master P contribute to the idea of the ghetto imaginary because they all challenge institutional forces such as the government, academia, industry, and the media that discuss black residential areas in terms of what they lack. These dominant narratives fail to see both the potential of the ghetto and how residents have intellectually engaged with their communities and their situations.

My selection of artists also represents the circular motion of blacks migrating north in the beginning of the twentieth century and moving back south beginning in the 1970s. Born in Jackson, Mississippi and reared in the south, Wright migrated north with his family as a teenager, and eventually found a literary home in Chicago. Gwendolyn Brooks also almost exclusively writes about black urban life in her hometown of Chicago. I indicate how both Wright and Brooks are responding to the sociological notions of black life that appeared in academic and governmental scholarship in the 1920s through the 1960s. Writing about his native Detroit in the 1970s, Donald Goines writes his four-part Kenyatta series through what I call post-

uprising literature which appeared in the aftermath of urban uprisings that emerged in the 1960s. Finally, New Orleans rapper Master P uses Southern hip hop to provide healing spaces within ghetto culture for black youth during the crack epidemic of the 1990s.

My research has identified four trends in how the ghetto has been taken up by black writers in the twentieth century: the ghetto as a place to leave in the 1940s, the ghetto as a nesting place of potential in the 1950s and 1960s, the ghetto as a place to defend in the 1970s, and finally, the ghetto as a culture in the 1990s. In the first chapter, I use Richard Wright's work in the 1940s to show the beginnings of the urban crisis in the wake of the Great Migration. Wright's work is a poignant example of how racial discrimination contributed to the founding of the ghetto as a catalyst to thwart black upward mobility. Wright also engages the intersection of race and space through his critique of social science, which also influenced his writing. I start with Wright as a way to show how cultural producers after him are grappling with representations of surviving in the ghetto while also trying to escape its debilitating social and spatial elements. This is a concept I define in the first chapter as the ghettoscape. I read three of his works backwards according to their publication date, from 1945-1940. First, I argue that in his memoir, *Black Boy*, Wright learns to "read" race and continuously learns to navigate the different social dynamics present in both the South and Chicago. I demonstrate that the trajectory of Wright's racial consciousness is important for understanding the author's conceptualization of black space. I contend that in Wright's work documentary nonfiction, *12 Million Black Voices*, his depiction of black ghetto life highlights how the ghettoscape is a product of anti-black racism because of how whites wanted to control the city by limiting the residential spaces that blacks could inhabit. Finally, I read the ghettoscape in Wright's novel, *Native Son*, as the writer's critique of social science and media outlets for inaccurately portraying the lives of poor and

working class black ghetto dwellers by failing to show how institutional racism contributes to the formation and longevity of the ghetto as a holding cell.

The second chapter looks at Gwendolyn Brooks's long poem "In the Mecca" (1968), which I argue represents some of the poet's most political writing as it critiques the victimization of single black working class mothers within welfare reform and sociological discourse. Brooks destabilizes popular stereotypes about working class and poor black women in the 1960s era of welfare reform by writing against damaging motifs of the black matriarch and the welfare mother that were presented in the federally-sponsored report, *The Negro Family: the Case for National Action* by Patrick E. Moynihan. Where Moynihan wrote unjustified sociological depictions of single black women, Brooks redirects prescriptive images of black urban womanhood to highlight the social and political complexities that influence black women to be read as unmotivated, damaging members of society. My analysis shifts critical reception in Brooks scholarship about "In the Mecca" away from debates about urban decline of the Mecca Building where the poem is centered, to focus on the urban crisis in order to demonstrate that Brooks is participating in a body of discourse that critiques systems of political power imposed on the black underclass. By demonstrating Brooks's engagement with the urban crisis rather than urban decline, my work foregrounds Brooks's depiction of sociopolitical injustice in the second half of her career, a topic that has yet to be fully explored.

Moving to Detroit, in the third chapter I argue that Donald Goines's four-novel Kenyatta series (1974) is a seminal work of post-uprising literature that critically engages black residential space, black activism, and the systems of oppression that perpetuate black poverty during the urban crisis. As post-uprising literature, Goines's urban fiction reflects the historical moment in the 1960s when artists depicted how black communities employed confrontational methods in

advocating for their rights rather than relying on peaceful protests and demonstrations. Using a ghetto revolutionary protagonist who uses violence to rid the ghetto of drugs and racist police officers, Goines's works depict self-defensive ghetto dwellers who are attempting to regain control of their space. My interventions in this chapter also underscore Goines's firsthand knowledge of Detroit's activism and the city's changing race relations in the wake of its 1967 civil disturbance. Thus, the Kenyatta series is also a response to the historical remembrance of Detroit's 1967 uprising as Goines cites the police—who feature prominently in his series—as inciters of the event. In localizing Goines to his hometown, I relocate his street lit back to the literal streets of Detroit that motivated the author's charged representations of black urban life and his critiques of oppressive systems that hinder the black underclass.

The fourth and final chapter considers how the ghetto became incorporated as a culture towards the end of the twentieth century, especially within Southern hip hop. I argue that Master P employs gangsta rap to critically engage the crack epidemic in black communities in the 1990s by promoting a ghetto culture that is invested in solidarity and perseverance in the face of systematic oppression. While he maintains the gangsta persona, Master P is also unique among his contemporaries because he simultaneously expresses a vulnerability that details the anxiety induced by the drug economy where gun violence is rampant. As such, I connect his lyrical narratives about street violence to social death and show that his ghetto memorial commemorating those lost to drugs and street violence reverses Bryan J. McCann's notion of the "mark of criminality" by acknowledging the humanity of the black underclass whose lives are considered insignificant by the state. These phenomena of violence, street economies, social death, and the ghetto memorial included in Master P's lyrical representation of the 1990s black

American ghetto construct a ghetto culture that is predicated on survival by giving a language for black youth to collectively and privately heal from crack-inflicted violence.

Chapter One:
Richard Writes Bigger Reading the Ghetto

Since the founding of Chicago, most of its black residents have lived on the South Side, removed from the epicenter of metropolitan life downtown (Spear 11). Starting in the twentieth century, the population of Chicago's black residents grew most rapidly as a result of industry demands for skilled workers, particularly during wartime. Most of these newcomers arrived from Southern states such as Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama. Thomas Lee Philpott notes that while blacks were actually newcomers alongside immigrants from Poland, Italy, Greece, and other Southeastern European areas, they lay claim to being the ethnic group with the earliest presence in Chicago (115). The period between 1900 and 1910 saw an increase of blacks living in areas separate from whites, chiefly due to white homeowners' resistance to living in integrated areas. In a 1940 pamphlet on black housing in Chicago, sociologist Horace Cayton writes:

> Since 1910, it has been increasingly difficult for Negroes to live outside the section of the city created by the agreements of real estate operators and antagonistic community organizations. And as the population increased the number of Negroes in the area greatly exceeded the available housing facilities. (7, 10)

This "section [outside] of the city" emerged due to white flight. As black homebuyers began to search for properties outside of the areas designated for them, white homeowners drove them out through intimidation or encouraged real estate agents to refuse to sell to them. When these tactics did not work, whites moved to other exclusively white areas of the city. The South Side, then,

only became black and expanded to accommodate black residents once the rhetoric of antiblackness became so strong that it inspired white flight.

Equally important to how blacks became permanently situated in ghettos is the agency that many other racially ethnic minorities were able to manifest in moving to other parts of the city once they came to be considered white. Even though many non-black minorities began their time in Chicago in racial enclaves, Philpott maintains that "[t]he presence of the blacks permitted all of the ethnics to pass for white, to be white" (118). These enclaves were thought to be temporary fixes that would eventually be dissolved. Such was the case for every ethnic group but black Americans, who were ushered into segregated parts of the city through a racism saturated in anti-blackness. Other immigrant groups were able to live among whites and identify with whiteness because they could transcend the marker of "other," albeit phenotypically, in a way that blacks could not. Economic exploitation of black homebuyers and renters was also an important element of the formation of the black ghetto in Chicago. The difficulty that Cayton references is black Chicagoans' limited choice concerning where they could live due to restrictive covenants—written, contractual agreements that prohibited the purchase, lease, or occupation of property by racial minorities deemed undesirable for residency. Such controlled housing options encouraged building owners who chose to lease to blacks to charge them higher rates than they did people from other racial groups. Because real estate managers knew that blacks had few living options, they were less motivated to maintain the physical upkeep of properties that were most likely already inadequate for occupancy. Even though some decent housing could be found along the edges of the South Side, most of the area resembled a "festering slum" whose houses, though less crowded than those found in the white minority areas, were often severely in need of repair (Spear 24).

Black Americans began to move into other parts of the South Side due to the vast number of migrants who relocated from the South, almost overpopulating city zones. Allan H. Spear maintains that "[t]he ghetto was already well-formed by the eve of World War I; the migration and the riot [of 1919] merely strengthened both the external and internal forces that had created it" (130). With the onset of the war, black Americans had greater economic and social opportunities outside of the South due to declining returns on agricultural investments and the need for labor in the industrial north. As immigration declined during wartime, black Americans were also pushed north by the demand for more labor on working crews. Chicago was one of the key destinations for migrants because it was at the head of two major Southern railroads, and its black community had already begun establishing its place within the city's sectors. As more migrants began coming from the Deep South, as opposed to the Upper South during the prewar years, "the migration converted the old South Side black belt from a mixed neighborhood into an exclusively Negro area" (Spear 142).

Escaping racial violence was an additional incentive for Black southerners to go north. Richard Wright's work, in particular, demonstrates the fear embedded within the black Southern psyche in the first half of the twentieth century. His story, "Big Boy Leaves Home" (1936), included in his first collection of fiction, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), depicts a young black boy who flees the South for fear of being murdered by a mob of white men after having accidently killed a white man. In Wright's 1940 novel, *Native Son*, the protagonist and his family move to Chicago after his father is lynched in Mississippi. In his 1945 memoir, *Black Boy*, young Wright and his family leave one southern town for another after his uncle is lynched. These depictions of black flight extend even to Wright's 1941 documentary text, *12 Million Black Voices*, and his poetry. Most grotesquely, in the poem "Between the World and Me," the

speaker encounters a lynched body in the woods, which he then figuratively embodies in a reimagining of the spectacle lynching attended by a celebratory group of whites. As Farah Jasmine Griffin has commented, "Wright unabashedly creates a South where the possibility of lynching is imminent and the memory of this possibility so strong that return is impossible" (28). While Griffin reads Wright's South as one that is oversaturated in physical racial violence, my work here stresses that Wright's North is also a place ridden with violence of another type—that of systematic and structural racial discrimination.

In this chapter, I use Richard Wright's work in the 1940s to trace the foundational underpinnings of the black ghetto that has been fixed within American life since at least World War II. More than any other author of his era, Wright engages with the systemic and structural forces that have traditionally worked against the uplift of the black underclass. Insofar as the permanency of the black ghetto is a result of the postwar urban crisis, I posit that Wright's work contributes to historic narratives of the urban crisis by citing the ghetto as a place of significant violence that must be abandoned. In order to arrive at the most detailed analysis of Wright's scripting of the ghetto, I read his oeuvre backwards from 1945 to 1940. First, Wright's memoir, *Black Boy*, and his documentary nonfiction, *12 Million Black Voices*, lay out how the author formulates his sense of race consciousness. I trace the ways in which Wright's depiction of black ghetto life highlights how the spatial elements of the ghetto, what I call the ghettoscape, constitute the ghetto as a product of systematic anti-black racism. Wright demonstrates that the black ghetto was conceived by whites who wanted control over the city and who therefore created a system by which blacks would be confined to certain geographical areas. This initiative to limit space where blacks could live was further perpetuated by limiting what kinds of employment and other opportunities of advancement were offered to them, as shown in his

memoir. Finally, I read Wright's novel, *Native Son,* to consider how his depiction of the ghettoscape contributes to his critique of social science and media outlets for inaccurately portraying the lives of poor and working class black ghetto dwellers by failing to show how racism contributes to the formation and longevity of the ghetto as a holding cell.

A native southerner, Richard Wright was born in 1908 in Roxie, Mississippi and lived throughout the delta region in such places as Arkansas and Tennessee. As one of the many Southerners to migrate to the North in the interwar years, Wright moved to Chicago in 1927 as a nineteen-year-old with a ninth-grade education. Because advanced educational opportunities were denied to him, Wright supplemented his intellectual growth in the South by reading books from a segregated library that he was able to access by forging a note and using his white employer's library card. These visits to the library introduced him to the work of journalist H. L. Mencken, which paved the way for him to study authors such as Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Alexander Dumas, and O. Henry and to frequent the pages of *Harper's*, *Atlantic Monthly,* and *American Mercury*. Within the first few years of living in Chicago, Wright was introduced to University of Chicago sociologist Louis Wirth by Wirth's wife, Mary Wirth, who was Wright's social worker. The professor gave him a list of recommended readings after Wright expressed an interest in learning about the maps and other items displayed in his office. These two independent studies in literature, journalism, and social science eventually influenced the socially significant fiction and other writings that Wright produced in the coming years. Having lived his entire life amidst profound racism, he developed a language to articulate both his impoverished, restricted life, and his feelings about society's treatment of his blackness. It comes as no wonder, then, that the ghetto—or Chicago's Black

Belt—should feature as strongly as it does in his works during the 1940s, as it provided a site for Wright to explore the multiple levels of inequalities experienced by black urban residents.

Reading: Race Consciousness

To arrive at any valid conclusion regarding the black ghetto, it is first necessary to situate it as a place founded within a regime of racial segregation, most especially in the housing market. Wright's work stands out in this respect, as it details race consciousness within the black urban experience that arises out of a national culture embedded in racism. His "reading" of race in his 1945 memoir, *Black Boy*, stems from his perspective as a black male confined to Chicago's Black Belt. Because Wright did not have an extensive formal education and had to come into his intellectual growth by educating himself through reading and other sources he went in search of, his early works use reading and writing as metaphors for various larger themes. More than any of Wright's works, *Black Boy* is filled with lessons on reading and writing about race consciousness.[1] Within this text, Wright highlights the moments that lead up to his first years in Chicago by emphasizing how he comes to self-awareness regarding his blackness and the whiteness of the world that he has to navigate in order to survive. Mikko Tuhkanen notes that in the first volume of his memoir, Wright suggests that "for a racially marked subject, a crucial skill in the South is the ability to *read* race and to show that s/he is literate in matters of race: to show by demeanor that one knows one's place" (114). Wright consistently encounters trouble in his adolescence because he cannot accept the subservient role

[1] Although the entire two-part manuscript was originally completed for the 1945 publication date, only the first half, which chronicles his life in the South up until he left for Chicago as a teenager, was published as *Black Boy* then. The second part detailing his time in Chicago was published in 1977 as *American Hunger*. The two parts were published together for the first time in 1991 as *Black Boy (American Hunger)*. Here, I cite the complete text as *Black Boy*.

that comes with his blackness. His developing race consciousness involves many instances of trial and error as he attempts to live up to the social standards his environment demands of him.

In *Black Boy*, Wright's primary lessons in reading do not come from the examination of texts, but rather from reading and responding to other people, most often whites. He begins to actively attempt to read whites after a violent encounter with a group of white men who pick him up in a truck after they see that his bicycle tire is flat. While on the way to town, the men offer Wright some liquor that he declines by simply saying, "Oh, no!" One of the men hits young Wright between the eyes with an empty whiskey bottle. After the men file out of the car and stand over him, the man who hit him scolds: "Nigger ain't you learned no better sense'n that yet? […] Ain't you learned to say sir to a white man yet?" This episode leaves Wright with a bitter lesson: "I was learning rapidly how to watch white people, to observe their every move, every fleeting expression, how to interpret what was said and what left unsaid" (*BB* 181). After this incident, Wright realizes that reading, or interpretation, is not just about recognizing specific racial and social markers, but about analyzing these markers. Although he was having a wonderful time with these men before they offered him the whiskey, Wright should have remembered the correct protocol for responding to white men in the South. Instead, Wright's exclusion of "sir" was read as deliberate disrespect.

While the narrator of *Black Boy* recognizes that he has to read people, he initially remains oblivious to the fact that he must present himself in an obedient manner while doing so. He takes this lesson from Griggs, a childhood friend, when he is trying to find a job one summer to provide for himself and his family. Until this point, Wright has had a difficult time maintaining employment, and before Griggs tells him where he can find work, he advises the narrator on how he can keep the work that he has acquired: "He paused and looked about; the streets were filled

with white people. He spoke to me in a low, full tone. 'Dick, look, you're black, black, *black*, see? Can't you understand that?'" (*BB* 183). Griggs informs his friend, "White people want you out of their way," and "You act around white people as if you didn't know that they were white. And they *see* it" (*BB* 184). The street as a public venue becomes a focal point in this conversation because it is a landscape in which black people are generally nowhere in sight and should definitely not be heard in the event that they are seen. For example, when trying to drive his point home about remaining out of white people's way, Griggs yanks Wright out of sight when some whites appear on the sidewalk on which they are talking. Although Wright thought that he already removed himself from their path, Griggs reminds him that he must be completely invisible. Furthermore, Griggs's reinforcement of Wright's race as "black, black, *black*" indicates that blackness is something that is readily visible and difficult to hide. Wright must learn what to do with his race, something he cannot rid himself of, so that it does not interfere with his safety or livelihood. In these scenes with Griggs, Wright learns that his blackness speaks before he does, and in not remaining invisible to white people, Wright is not only unconsciously speaking but employing his blackness in what will be perceived as a defiant gesture.

The narrator does not purposefully try to be disobedient, but he still faces trouble because he actually knows all too well that race is a fiction, that his blackness does not inherently represent anything negative in spite of whites identifying it as problematic. To this extent, Griggs's advice presents itself as an impossible task. Though the narrator accepts the advice, he nonetheless declares:

> [I]t was simply utterly impossible for me to calculate, to scheme, to act, to plot all the time. I would remember to dissemble for short periods, then I would forget

> and act straight and human again, not with the desire to harm anybody, but merely forgetting the artificial status of race and class. (*BB* 184-185)

Though Wright previously realized that he needed to learn to read whiteness, he now fails to behave correctly in response to such readings. He essentially admits that he cannot pretend to be subordinate to white people, or anyone, most especially because he knows that demographic labels of race and class should not be indicators of how he should be treated. Wright's scripting of his actions in this way presents blackness as something that must be performed, and throughout his memoir, blackness is akin to a costume that the narrator continuously forgets to put on before he goes on stage.

In *Black Boy,* the narrator refuses to enter into a racial contract with the white world around him. Charles W. Mills theorizes the racial contract as an agreement that is political, moral, epistemological, and, essentially, exploitative. He defines the racial contract as

> that set of formal or informal agreements […] between the members of one subset of humans, henceforth designated by (shifting) "racial" (phenotypical/genealogical/cultural) criteria […] as "white," and coextensive […] with the class of full persons, to categorize the remaining subset of humans as "nonwhite" and of a different and inferior moral status, subpersons, so that they have a subordinate civil standing in the white or white-ruled polities the whites either already inhabit or establish or in transactions as aliens with these polities. (11)

More simply, the racial contract is an unspoken agreement between "races"—white and nonwhite—that enables whites to keep nonwhites in a subordinate class in order to retain benefits only available to the whites. This agreement is, in short, how whiteness operates as both

superior and antithetical to blackness. Whiteness, and the perpetual advancement of white people, is only able to exist under this agreement's strict code of antiblackness, which states that anything related to black as a race is inherently unfavorable, undesirable, and unacceptable. Antiblackness is therefore the notion that blackness should be contained and/or worked against. The polities that Mills names are factors of white privilege denied to the nonwhites, or in the case of Richard Wright, black people. Such privileges include, for example, expecting to get a job without the fear of being rejected or being employed only under certain agreements because of one's race, such as what happens to Wright during his talk with Griggs. Wright believes that he should be able to say and do as he pleases because the racial and class labels that are placed on him are not factual truths, thereby rendering the racial contract void.

Thus, the first volume of *Black Boy* details Wright's development as a black reader of whites and his recognition that whites are not at all invested in learning to read him. Though the whites have control over social situations, the narrator notes that blacks must put more effort into interracial encounters: "In my dealing with whites I was conscious of the entirety of my relations with them, and they were conscious only of what was happening at a given moment. I had to keep remembering what others took for granted; I had to think out what others felt" (*BB* 196). One of the central conflicts of *Black Boy* is Wright's "misreading" of race within the bounds of the racial contract. Though he is right to conceive of race as a fiction, within the American quotidian, race is a concept that is always operating and serves as a determinant in the actions that people have with one another. Moreover, when he mentions the "entirety of [his] relations" with whites and whites' focus only on "a given moment," Wright is alluding to learning through racial trauma. He recognizes that one privilege of whiteness is that whites don't have to take into consideration all of their previous interactions with black people in their communication with

them. For Wright to have a successful social encounter with any white person, he must also remember all the mistakes he has made before in such endeavors in order to prevent making them again. Following his experience with the white man who slapped him, Wright has gained most of the necessary knowledge, but he cannot see the sense in being so cognizant of whites if they are not making the same conscious efforts to learn about and respect him (*BB* 181).

If the first volume of *Black Boy* is about learning to read in the South, then the second installment of the memoir concerns Wright's translating this newly gained knowledge to help him succeed in the urban North. In much the same way that Wright began to learn the rules of reading and interpreting race in Mississippi, his migration to Chicago means that he must learn a somewhat new set of rules and regulations as they apply to race in a different environment. The first indicator of his need to translate occurs in the train depot when he arrives in Chicago and finds that there are no WHITE or FOR COLORED signs as instructions for where he is allowed to be seen. Wright is immediately lost because there is no public indication of how he should behave. Such racial signs also reinforce racial contracts in that they maintain authority over the public space by informing black people of which places they are allowed to occupy. The mere presence of the signs—through language and visual cues—spells out the obedient behavior that "colored" persons are meant to display in the presence of whites. In *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow*, Elizabeth Abel writes:

> Collapsing the space between Jim Crow signs and the bodies they imprint is a common trope of narratives of race. For African American writers in particular, the first encounter with a segregation sign is a defining moment of racial inscription, a painful rite of passage that spells the fall into race. To learn to read

> the "Colored" sign is to learn that one has already been read by a law that writes its terms on a body forever. (33)

So, it is not so much that Wright is not being read by whites, but that blackness is considered so insignificant by whites that they cannot read it on the individual level—all black people are read as the same. Wright appears not to be as struck by the presence of these signs while in the South because he does not subscribe to popular notions of categorical difference between races. The narrator eventually finds that the lack of actual texts detailing the behavior he must adopt is indicative of the method of Northern racism, in which whiteness is still superior, albeit in less overt ways than in the South.

Describing his first streetcar ride in Chicago, Wright says that "another white man sat across from me and buried his face in a newspaper. How could this possibly be? Was he conscious of my blackness?" (*BB* 262). Unlike when Griggs taught Wright how to stay out of the way of Southern whites, Wright is surprised that Northern white people don't have a problem with his presence. By questioning the man's consciousness of his blackness, the narrator is not inquiring about the physical makeup of his racial identity, but rather about what that identity signifies. Until this point, Wright has been learning to read race in such a way that he is programmed to be both invisible and obedient in the presence of whites. This streetcar ride represents Wright's first time in any type of situation where antiblackness is not operating actively against him in the immediate moment, which is significantly different from Griggs's reinforcement of Wright being "black, black, *black*." Wright notes that when he was first learning how he had to read white people in the South, "While standing before a white man I had to figure out how to perform each act and how to say each word. I could not help it. I could not

grin" (*BB* 196). In this new environment, the narrator finds that he is no longer required to perform docility.

Wright furthermore displays a strong sense of knowing how whiteness operates in his own life on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line because his intellectual development occurs at the same time that he is navigating this geographical boundary. He thus notes:

> A dim notion of what life meant to a Negro in America was coming to consciousness in me, not in terms of external events, lynchings, Jim Crowism, and the endless brutalities, but in terms of crossed-up feeling, of psyche pain. I sensed that Negro life was a sprawling land of unconscious suffering, and there were but few Negroes who knew the meaning of their lives, who could tell their story. (*BB* 267)

This notion of "psyche pain" is found throughout the entirety of Wright's memoir. If we read *Black Boy* as an examination of alienation, as have many other scholars, the author's gesture toward the mental health of African Americans in the twentieth century becomes very apparent. The "crossed-up feeling" he invokes is a conflicting consciousness wherein the subject realizes through continual exposure to violence that they belong to a nation that does not want them. I therefore agree with Abdul Jan Mohamed that Wright's constant battle to maintain his consciousness represents "a double consciousness" and "a 'duplicity' that turns the consciousness of its own condition into a cunning weapon. [*Black Boy*] is a remarkable document of Wright's total absorption of the racist attempt to negate him and his own total negation of that attempt" (118). Taking a cue from W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of double consciousness, JanMohamed reads the need for whites to mold black minds into an unconscious

subjectivity as a negation, one that Wright strives to negate.[2] Throughout the memoir, Wright depicts himself as alone in developing this black consciousness, which ultimately leads to his perpetual isolation in both white and black social circles.

Eventually, Wright learns that even though he comes into more contact and sustains better relationships with whites in the North, the racial contract presents itself differently while still allowing for the exploitation of African Americans. Wright's greatest epiphany in this regard occurs after he finds work in a hospital in Chicago. At this point, his personal experiences and his readings intersect when he considers the ways in which African Americans are seen as no more human in the North than they were in the South. While working as an orderly in a medical research institute housed in the large hospital, Wright witnesses two of his black coworkers get into a physical altercation that results in many cages opening that held animals used for experiments. Eventually, they get the animals back into the cages without the researchers noting the error. Wright tries to decide whether or not he should confess to his employer the damage that his coworkers caused, but he eventually reaches the conclusion that doing so would be of no advantage to him because he would still be associated with his mischievous peers. In short, he is not a valued asset to the director because he is not seen as someone capable of intellectual productivity. Of the work environment, Wright says:

> The hospital kept us four Negroes, as though we were close kin to the animals we tended, huddled together down in the underworld corridors of the hospital, separated by a vast psychological distance from the significant processes of the

[2] In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W. E. B. DuBois states: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." (9) Wright is able to look at himself as a black man, but he resists acknowledging the manner in which the white world reads his blackness.

> rest of the hospital—just as America had kept us locked in the dark underworld of American life for three hundred years—and we made our own code of ethics, values, loyalty. (314)

In one gesture, Wright equates the hospital with American society, which labels his intellectual capacity as equivalent to that of animals, a subhuman category. In this epiphany, the hospital becomes a metaphor for blackness quarantined mentally and spatially in the urban city. If the hospital represents the metropolis, the "underworld corridors" constitute the residential ghetto that Wright would eventually return to after leaving his job. Furthermore, this underworld is also indicative of the "psychological distance" that whites purposefully keep from ethnic minorities, contributing to the "psyche pain" that is inflicted on African Americans. Such mental distance is mapped onto physical distance in *Black Boy* and other volumes of Wright's work. As shown in *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright takes readers into the confines of the underworld that is Chicago's Black Belt and names the perpetrators that ensure its longevity.

Seeing: The Ghettoscape

In *Black Boy*, though Wright references living in the Black Belt and having to cross into the main part of Chicago for work, he does not go into great detail about the exact nature of his living in a racially segregated black enclave. The spatial elements of the ghetto are present in all three of the works I discuss in this chapter, but the images of black urban life in the Black Belt appear most strongly in Wright's documentary nonfiction, *12 Million Black Voices* (1941). In this text, Wright delves into what I call the ghettoscape—the documented struggle of residents who are attempting to move beyond the confines of ghetto walls while simultaneously navigating the debilitating social and spatial elements that are persistent in keeping residents locked not only

in the ghetto, but often in cycles of poverty as well. The term itself references both "landscape" and "escape," reflecting the liminal space by which residents are both dejected from civic participation in the larger city via racial housing limitations while also trying to escape the isolation and unpleasant way of life inside of the ghetto. Wright's body of work is one of the first to detail how ghetto dwellers straddle the line between making a home within poverty and trying to overcome the same cycles that keep them impoverished. By attending to this intersection, I contend that writers of black urban life during the urban crisis have been writing in response to the ghettoscape, creating depictions of the ghetto that detail both dejection and belonging. In what follows, I continue my exploration of how Wright portrays his personal experience with the South Side of Chicago in *Black Boy* and I explain how he depicts this same black underclass as a general audience that is not necessarily specific to Chicago in *Black Voices*.

While his depictions of the black underclass focus on reading in *Black Boy*, Wright portrays black urban life through the lens of "seeing" in *12 Million Black Voices* in an attempt to shed light on the circumstances that black migrants fleeing the South face in attempting to secure housing and employment in the urban cities of the North. As other scholars have previously noted, Wright's documentary text is wholly dedicated to raising consciousness about the evolution of the socioeconomic status of African Americans in the early to mid-twentieth century. *Black Voices* is perhaps the most unique of his works in that it contains text with accompanying images chosen by collaborator Edwin Rosskam. Rosskam selected the images from the Farm Security Administration Files of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which were taken by various photographers—such as Rosskam himself, Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, Marion Post, and Russell Lee—who were hired by the federal government to document the Depression era. *Black Voices* appears during a time in which many such documentary texts

were introduced to the American public, including Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor's *American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939), Arthur Raper and Ira Reid's *Sharecroppers All*, and James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941).

While these photo-texts mean to portray the effects of poverty on the rural United States and the poor and working classes, the manner in which they are incorporated into documentary projects is at times problematic, most especially in relation to the history of black representation. One of the blatant examples of racial misrepresentation is Bourke-White and Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937). Nicholas Natanson points out that as opposed to Bourke-White's white subjects, her black subjects are portrayed as pathetic in how they are shown crouching, kneeling, and lying as if deformed. Natanson continues that Bourke-White's images distort black culture while her white subjects are photographed from a distance that both protects their dignity and allows viewers to formulate their own conclusions. Caldwell's accompanying fictionalized captions further aid in perpetuating stereotypes that blacks are lazy and unintelligent (Natanson 26-27). One image of a black woman sitting with two children is joined with the quotation: "I got more children now than I know what to do with, but they keep coming along like watermelon in the summertime." Likewise, the caption for a photograph of a black preacher excitedly exalting in front of his congregation reads: "Hurry, folks, hurry! Getting religion is like putting money in the bank." While the text alongside photographs of white churchgoers comments on the dress and thinness of the subjects, the text paired with photographs of black churchgoers makes a mockery of black religion.

Wright presents *12 Million Black Voices* as a corrective to the representations of blackness in the documentary photography projects of the previous decade by giving humanity to

black subjects that was not previously accounted for by white photographers and writers. I agree with Jason Puskar's astute insistence that Wright's text attempts to reclaim control over an archive of images of black Americans that was created by white Americans. According to Puskar, "*Black Voices* is also a record of the written word's stubborn refusal to yield ground to the photographic image, a refusal tantamount to racial resistance" (182). Wright's text thus shifts reception of the photographs from views of primitivism and backwardness to notions of perseverance and survival. Wright's text is also unique in that it formulates a narrative that grounds black Southerners as survivors of a culture of racial violence and deliberately humanizes its subjects through a narrative of mobility from the South to the North.

In both *Black Boy* and *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright presents the urban metropolis as an unexpected, violent, and unwelcoming force in depicting his initial encounter with the city. In many ways, Wright demonstrates that the city is programmed to eject black subjectivity. Similar to "the underworld" of the hospital in *Black Boy*, Wright depicts himself as removed from the larger realms of city life in describing his experience as an African American within the physical place and space of the city and his residential quarters. This social separation is quite different from his time in the South, where he felt more included within the fold of dailiness, even if his presence was met with physical or verbal harm. An initial difference is marked by the narrator in noting how white the street was while standing with Griggs as opposed to how dim everything appears when he arrives in Chicago:

> My first glimpses of the flat black streets of Chicago depressed and dismayed me, mocked all of my fantasies. Chicago seemed like an unreal city whose mystical houses were built of slabs of black coal wreathed in palls of gray smoke, houses whose foundations were sinking slowly into the dank prairie. Flashes of steam

> showed intermittently on the wide horizon, gleaming translucently in the winter sun. The din of the city entered my consciousness, entered to remain for years to come. The year was 1927. (*BB* 261)

Chicago is prone to the unreal because Wright is trying to make sense of the complicated relationship that black people have to it; though the street is more laced with literal blackness than the white streets of Mississippi, it is not the type that would suggest any progress from how blackness as a concept is conceived in the South. Indeed, in noting the city's depressingly flat black and gray streets and houses, Wright suggests that the city is appalling to a young black man who expected a more welcoming place with more opportunities for growth than were afforded to him in the South. The mocking gesture of the city is presented all at once as a place where signs of blackness are allowed but black uplift is refused. Just as he is taught that his blackness must be moderated because it signifies something negative and undesirable, Wright also recognizes the city—though he is more at liberty to roam its streets than he was in Mississippi—as a force that is consciously working against him.

Wright scripts the ghetto as a capitalist enterprise that is meant to thwart black economic advancement. Take, for example, his aforementioned portrayal of the hospital, where he and his black co-workers were "huddled together down in the underworld corridors" and where "America had kept us locked in the dark underworld of American life for three hundred years" (*BB* 314). The trope of the underworld appears in literature concerning the metropolitan city throughout the twentieth century, including Wright's short story "The Man Who Lived Underground," in which a man makes his home in city sewers after he is falsely accused of murder. Thomas Heise considers the underworld those marginal areas of the city inhabited by surplus residents, usually minorities, who cannot afford to live in grandiose areas or are not

deemed socially acceptable to do so. According to Heise, "quarantining surplus populations by zoning and segregation […] were procedures for stabilizing the city in the midst of tumultuous upheavals caused by industrialization" (8). Ghettos were thus formed to house the people who could not economically compete with the demands of capitalistic frenzy. Elsewhere in the memoir, Wright finds that Chicago's preoccupation with capital and materialism enable his social and economic isolation from the rest of the city. In his depiction of his initial days in Chicago, Wright tells of a moment when he is refused a job because he does not meet the minimum body weight requirement. He writes, "[M]y losing was only another manifestation of that queer, material way of American living that computed everything in terms of the concrete: weight, color, race, fur coats, radios, electric refrigerators, cars, money…it seemed that I simply could not fit into a materialistic life" (*BB* 281). Wright is so familiar in the fast-paced, aggressive urban environment that he automatically interprets not getting the job as an act of losing. Rather than associating his loss with materialistic misfortune, he considers it a strike against his very life because it means he will go even longer without essential food and shelter that are necessary for his survival in the city. As is the case with many ghetto residents that Wright describes, poverty is working against him: if his family would have had more money to buy food earlier than the day before his physical exam, he would have probably gained enough weight to have met the requirement. Through this example, Wright also relays that black people are so socially inconsequential to the city that they are treated as if they are part of its physical features, a notion that he develops more fully in *12 Million Black Voices*.

As a text that crosses geographical boundaries, *12 Million Black Voices* is a treatise on the state of black life in the first half of the twentieth century and is specifically concerned with detailing how black Americans remained in the underclass in urban industries to which they

relocated for socioeconomic advancement. More pointedly than any other of Wright's works, *Black Voices* demonstrates that ghettos were developed as longstanding holding cells for the black underclass by racially discriminatory real estate practices and white flight patterns that restricted equal opportunities to employment and education to racial minorities. While these ideas are hinted at in his memoir, in *Black Voices* they come into full focus as the text raises consciousness about the everyday violence black Southerners face and the discreet violence embedded within the culture of the North.

Wright's rendering of the migrant's first encounter with the city paradoxically evokes a newfound life and a quickening death. Titled "Death on the City Pavements," the third section of the book opens with paragraphs that are indicative of Wright's ongoing investment in uncovering how the urban city inflicts violence upon black lives and black bodies:

> Perhaps never in history has a more utterly unprepared folk wanted to go to the city; we were barely born as folk when we headed for the tall and sprawling centers of steel and stone. […] [W]e who had never belonged to any organizations except the church and burial societies; […] we were such a folk as this when we moved into a world that was destined to test all we were, that threw us into the scales of competition to weigh our mettle. And how were we to know that […when] we […] set our awkward feet upon the pavements of the city, life would begin to exact of us a heavy toll in death? (*BV* 93)

Just as the city is an unwelcoming place in *Black Boy*, Wright invokes the sense of hard, grandiose material substances not to display the riches of a new land, but to symbolize how the city is a complex entity that is able to swallow residents. Nevertheless, where he introduces the city's fascination with material gain as a key reason blacks are ejected from the cityscape in his

memoir, here Wright uses sociological notions to imply that the Northern city takes on the persona of a social organization that blacks are not accustomed to interacting with. Wright envisions city life as ordered in such a way that industrial and social sectors move in tandem with each other, functioning as a factory in which blacks are meant to work as machines, not people. Black people therefore belong to the city under a certain, limited membership: though they are part of the capitalist enterprise of the city, they do not have equal opportunity to its profits. Thus, the death that he cites is not so much a physical, individual death as it is a social death in which the city aims for the black psyche to become permanently housed along the margins of societal concern.

While literary criticism of *Black Voices* tends to examine how Wright comments on nationalism, employs an encompassing black folk identity, and writes in relation to the documentary mode of the Depression era, I posit that the second half of the text is also heavily concerned with how the metropolis ejects the upwardly mobile black subject. The kitchenette in particular represents how the complexities of the black underclass's confinement to certain parts of the city offer safety from Southern violence while simultaneously inflicting another type of misery. As Wright explains:

> Sometimes five or six of us live in a one-room kitchenette, a place where simple folk such as we should never be held captive. A war sets up in our emotions: one part of our feelings tells us that it is good to be in the city, that we have a chance at life here, that we need but turn a corner to become a stranger, that we no longer need to bow and dodge at the sight of the Lords of the Land. Another part of our feelings tell us that, in terms of worry and strain, the cost of living in the

> kitchenettes is too high, that the city heaps too much responsibility upon us and gives too little security in return. (*BV* 105)

This description of the kitchenette mirrors Wright's reflection in his memoir about remaining physically bound and mentally constricted from growing intellectually within the black belt. Again, he indicates that the kitchenette is often impossible to escape and moreover indicates that the stress of navigating such unfavorable living conditions is also a price that must be paid in addition to the high financial costs. Black migrants no longer had to deal with white employers who exploited their labor in the South, but nonetheless faced the urban city which proved to be another barrier in and of itself working against their quest for advancement. Similar to their options for employment before relocation, blacks were expected to work underpaying and undesirable jobs in the city without the employment and housing security.

In *Black Voices*, the kitchenette is centered in a zone of many wars: a mental war within the black psyche, an economic war between tenants and landlords, and a spatial war against the inadequate infrastructure of buildings and streets. In *Black Voices*, the black psyche confronts a different brand of racism than experienced in the South in much the same way that Wright identifies in his memoir, where he notes: "Black people and white people moved about, each seemingly intent upon his private mission. There was no racial fear. Indeed, each person acted as though no one existed but himself" (*BB* 261). During his first contact with Chicago, Wright immediately erases racism as an operative because he cannot see it in ways that were most visible to him in his native South. In Mississippi, Wright would have been subjected to more control not only over where he could and could not go, but also in terms of how he was to behave in each of those places. In other words, his bodily actions were already scripted for him in ways that they were not in the North. As previously mentioned, the narrator eventually reaches

the conclusion that people in the North are more concerned with materialism than Southerners, since they claimed that he could not fit into such a society because he has nothing of value to offer. Nevertheless, in adopting a more journalistic approach in *Black Voices*, Wright says:

> It seems as though now we are living inside of a machine; days and events move with a hard reasoning of their own. We live among swarms of people, yet there is a vast distance between people, a distance that words cannot bridge. (*BV* 100)

The distance here is twofold: there is a psychological difference that whites maintain in marking blackness as inferior, and the physical distance created by white flight that segregates black residential areas from white residential areas.

The second battle that migrants face upon entering the city is coping with debilitating capitalist housing and job markets. Bill V. Mullen insists that Wright focuses on the kitchenette in describing black migrants' economic transition because "[t]he move from southern sharecropper agrarian economy to northern industrial center was symbolized for Wright as a move from one regime of capitalist administration ('Lords of the Land') to another ('Bosses of the Building')" (2008). By emphasizing that blacks are only allowed to live near factories and other industrious environments, Wright situates these kitchenettes as enclaves where black people perform much of the city's low-income labor but are not allowed to actually accrue any significant wealth as a result of that labor. Ghetto residents are thus seen more as factors of industrial design than as citizens who are able to offer more than physical labor. This particular section comes in the midst of Wright detailing that the landlord of the tenements, or the "Bosses of the Buildings," are not so much concerned with the lives of their residents as they are with garnering a profit from charging blacks more for rent than they did whites, without maintaining

the upkeep of the property. Such economic exploitation is a motivating factor for why residents want to flee the ghettoscape.

The third and most vile war fought within the black ghetto experience is that against the inadequate physical upkeep of the buildings and streets within black residential areas. This conflict against living conditions and city infrastructure is one of Wright's primary concerns in the third section of *Black Voices*, and his warning of the dangers of the kitchenette in particular represents a pivotal point of consciousness-raising in the project. In poetic prose that covers seven pages (including photos), Wright describes the kitchenette as an unsuitable dwelling place that invokes more physical and mental harm than good. According to Wright, "The kitchenette is our prison, our death sentence without a trial, the new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks" (*BV* 106). In the grand scheme of the project, the feature on the kitchenette is quite short, but it is in this small space that Wright exposes the ills of racism that subject city dwellers to such horrid conditions. Black residents are expected to live in and be content with these conditions. They are not encouraged to envision anything better for themselves because of the way in which their situation becomes normalized by property owners and city officials. Augmenting the power of Wright's words, the photos include a seemingly broken but definitely unclean toilet, children sleeping on a pallet on the floor, and family photos. Amidst all of these photos, the walls of the interior in the background appear to be crumbling down, as if the building is abandoned despite the obvious invocation of families who live their days there.

Though Wright figures these three wars as exclusive to African Americans on whom they take a toll, the third section of *Black Voices* reveals his thesis that the problem of the black underclass, "the Negro problem" as it was known, is actually a crisis facing the nation as a

whole. By naming the chapter "Death on the City Pavements," Wright focuses on the black migrant experience from the interior of the kitchenette to the exterior of the city street. A death on the actual pavement doesn't necessarily blame anyone in particular, but it nevertheless makes a statement that the plight of the black Southern migrant is a problem that confronts society at large. For such a death to occur on a public platform that is used by all (passersby, vendors, children, tourists, the homeless) insinuates that one cannot look away from it. As Wright states in the introduction to *Black Metropolis*, "there is a problem facing us, a bigger one than even that of the Negro, a problem of which the Negro problem is a small but highly symbolically important one" (Drake xxi).

Writing: The Bigger (Ghetto) Story

In *Black Boy* and *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright conceptualizes the ghetto as an unavoidable entrapment for a class of people who have little to no economic, educational, or social capital. In both of these works, the Southern black migrant's journey to urban centers in the North concludes in the same manner: high hopes of advancement are thwarted by economic exploitation amid other institutional blockages that deny blacks upward mobility. Wright also takes these issues to task in his 1940 novel, *Native Son*, to demonstrate how media and scholarly sources silence ghetto narratives by misrepresenting that experience. In the fan mail that Wright received immediately after the novel's publication, many readers commented that the novel showed them outright fragments of reality that they previously refused to acknowledge. *Native Son* is one of the earliest commercial successes in the twentieth century to explicitly demonstrate how the metropolis inflicts violence on the black underclass and the extent to which whites are the source of that violence. Taking the reader into both the confines of the Black Belt and the

larger city of Chicago, Wright shows how both of these spaces are controlled by white power. In doing so, he indicates that the feeling of confinement invoked by the Black Belt is not just embedded within the ghettoscape; it is also present whenever the protagonist feels surrounded by white people. Thus, Wright suggests that the ghetto is more than an actual place—it is a concept that appears in many different environments in much of the same ways that racial oppression is omnipresent throughout the urban terrain.

Native Son chronicles the life of Bigger Thomas, a twenty-year-old black man from Chicago's working class South Side, after he commits the murders of two women, one white and the other black. The first section, "Fear," takes place over the course of one day as Bigger starts a new position as a chauffeur for an affluent white family and accidently smothers the young heiress, Mary Dalton, before dismembering her body and disposing of it in the Daltons' furnace. Coincidentally, Mr. Dalton owns the property where Bigger and his family live, making him already involved in Bigger's alienation from society. While fleeing from police in the second section, "Flight," Bigger purposefully kills his girlfriend, Bessie Mears, by striking her in the head with a brick so that she does not tell law officials that he is responsible for Mary's murder. "Fate," the third and final section, occurs after Bigger is caught, and it covers his trial and conviction for raping and killing Mary but not for murdering Bessie, a black woman. In the final moments of the novel, Bigger realizes how racial discrimination has led to his fate, but it is in the second section that he starts to notice how the very fact of his blackness has informed his and his family's unfortunate socioeconomic situation in the city of Chicago and the Black Belt. As I will demonstrate, even though Bigger eventually finds a language to challenge narratives circulated about him and the crimes of which he is accused, he initially accepts the slanderous and untrue stories about his character and the fabricated details about Mary's death.

Here I consider the ways in which *Native Son* critiques the treatment of black urban life within sociological and mass media discourse. Whereas Wright "reads" race in *Black Boy* and "sees" the ghettoscape in *12 Million Black Voices*, *Native Son* uses both of these tropes to underscore how Black Belt residents are not allowed to "write" their own story. The Chicago School of Sociology took a keen interest in studying blacks who migrated north following World War I, but Wright considered the sociological writings from these white social scientists to be inadequate representations of black life because they failed to account for the social systems that produce and govern black inequality. Such false depictions dominated public opinion because of their academic standing, thus silencing the voices of the poor and working class blacks of the Black Belt who were not encouraged to declare how racial discrimination within society at large was the main purveyor of their social and economic standing. Robert Park's work in particular stands out in this respect because it has been challenged by scholars for its lack of critical engagement with social structures and systems that influence race and ethnicity. Though not a scholar himself, Richard Wright is among one of the earliest to critique the Chicago School's method and intent of performing and publishing research on black urban communities in the early to mid-twentieth century, most of which consisted of Southern migrants. In what follows, I give a brief overview of scholarship detailing Wright's engagement with sociology and a review of contemporary scholarship that points out the pitfalls in Park's work. Next, I contend that Wright noticed the shortcomings in Chicago School scholarship once he began work as a journalist reporting on black urban communities in New York City in the 1930s. Finally, I show that Wright uses journalism in *Native Son* as a metaphor to comment on the dangers of misrepresentation in sociological discourse.

Social scientists began to take a keen interest in the different ethnic groups that were making their home in Chicago during World War I. Headed by Robert Park, The Chicago School of Sociology, in particular, established itself as a major institution of social science research by generating methods for studying the behavioral and social patterns of these groups. Under Park's leadership, urban ethnography—the comprehensive study of culture through immersion—became the primary research method for discussing race and ethnicity. According to Davarian Baldwin, Park and his colleagues were able to benefit from the ethnographic methods because the University of Chicago was the only "pure white" institution on the South Side once the white residents of Hyde Park where the university is located began moving north to avoid the influx of blacks. Having such access to the black community made it easy for academics to inspect the lives of their subjects first-hand (Baldwin 404). Park's chief contribution to the study of race and ethnic relations was his concept of a race relations cycle through which alien peoples pass once they are brought into close proximity to a more dominant culture or race. Published in the textbook he coauthored with Ernest Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (1921), Park's concept is framed by four successive stages: contact, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation. Barbara Ballis Lal writes that Park's work remains crucial to the sociological study of race and ethnicity even in the latter half of the twentieth century. According to Lal, sociologists in the 1940s and 1950s who were dedicated to structural concerns challenged ethnography because they felt it failed to take into account the relationship between social institutions and a theoretical social system.

Nevertheless, though Park is remembered as a "father" of urban sociology and the study of American race relations, he has been critiqued by contemporary scholars for the ways in which he approached blackness as primitive. Lal argues that though Park is often criticized for

his assertion that African Americans were "the lady among the races" because they were unable to capitalize on and exploit their ethnic culture to create exclusive social institutions and maintain a positive identity, his scholarship was mistaken because it was based on a limited view of his larger body of work (Lal 4-6). Still, while Davarian Baldwin agrees that Park's methods were helpful in creating a foundation for the study of black people in the early twentieth century, he refutes any claim that Parks works have been misread. Instead, Baldwin contends that Park's works were centrally flawed in considering race conflict and racial features as categories that could be changed through assimilation. While assimilation worked for some ethnic groups, it proved not to be applicable to blacks who faced a more aggressive form of racism than other non-white races and ethnicities. Moreover, Baldwin points out that Park rendered blacks as non-intellectuals who were naturally able to succeed in the arts and entertainment—interests that would assist in their assimilation into the white race. Park's work thus failed to account for the complex humanity of black Americans by considering the black race as essentially unintelligent prior to the introduction of whiteness.

Regardless of Park's intent, black writers and intellectuals in the middle of the twentieth century were often critical of his scholarly approach, including Richard Wright, who found a more thorough analysis of black urbanity within the work of black sociologists. For example, in the introduction to St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's sociological study of urban black life in Chicago, *Black Metropolis* (1945), Wright testified that it was from social scientists working in the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago that he first learned of the forces that shaped black people's experience in the urban United States.[3] However, while he seems to praise

[3] In "The Search for Richard Wright," a lecture delivered to the Institute of the Black World in December 1969, Horace Cayton says that Wright used some of his files, Louis Wirth's concepts of secular and sacred societies, and Robert Redfield's "folk-urban" categories to develop many of the characterizations of real estate agencies and landlords in the third section of *12 Million Black Voices*. (Horace R. Cayton Papers, Box 17, Folder 2)

the work that comes from these scholars in laying the foundation for the material in *Black Metropolis*, Wright immediately undercuts his approval by saying of Drake and Cayton's study: "But let me bluntly warn the reader at the outset: This is no easy book. In order to understand it, you may have to wrench your mind rather violently out of your accustomed ways of thinking" (Drake xix). Wright's warning hints at possible oversights in the previous works produced about black urban life by white authors who do not portray the raw, significant details about the situation at hand. Wright then goes on to explicitly say that Drake and Cayton—both black sociologists—had to write the book assuming that their white readers knew nothing about black people and, most especially, with a mindset that was conscious of the "over-all American problem" (Drake xxvii). Because Wright mentions sociologists and societal problems in the same sentence, he suggests that anti-black racism is the overarching problem that other scholars of the Chicago school fail to address. Yet, Wright's criticism of white sociologists is perhaps best summed up in his tongue-in-cheek proclamation that "*Black Metropolis* might come as a jolt to whites who assume that their knowledge of the Negro excels the knowledge of Negroes by Negroes" (Drake xxvii).

While scholars have commented extensively on Wright's attraction to sociology, few have assessed the ways in which he diverged from its disciplinary practices. In some of the most compelling scholarship on Wright's engagement with sociology, Carla Capetti has called for a reading of *Black Boy* as a text in which sociology is employed to reflect a struggle between the individual and society, a common sociological theme. Capetti explains that Wright's use of the participant-observer framework within the memoir is very similar to the methods used by the Chicago School in its assessment of migrant and immigrant communities. Capetti maintains that sociological thinking allowed Wright to create his own view of social reality to both understand

and record his specific life story. Elsewhere, Robert Bone and Cynthia Tolentino have argued that Wright's encounters with sociology, Communism, and Marxism helped him to intellectualize the black experience in his writing. Bone traces Wright's use of sociology through his professional and personal relationship with Horace Cayton, a black sociologist trained at the University of Chicago. Highlighting that Wright's exposure to sociology occurred just before his introduction to the Marxism of the John Reed Club and his subsequent membership in the Communist Party, Bone insists that "Wright absorbed Chicago sociology the way he absorbed other schools of thought and bodies of literature—passionately and eclectically" (Bone 136). Likewise, Cynthia Tolentino has called attention to Wright's unstable relationship with sociology by examining the ways in which Wright both rejects sociology but also uses it to authorize his own emerging status as a producer of knowledge. While I agree that sociology was essential to Wright's work, I argue that Wright's fiction also contained a negative critique of sociology, one that challenged the same methods that Capetti identifies. As I will demonstrate, a close reading of *Native Son* reveals that Wright was skeptical of Chicago School methods because they did not privilege the voices of their subjects and thus maintained a misrepresentation of the black urban experience. Wright explores this misrepresentation in *Native Son* through the use of false, fantastical stories in the newspapers that Bigger reads and those that he uses as maps to help him navigate a potential escape from the cityscape.

Wright writes against Park's shortcomings that Davarian Baldwin points out by humanizing the Black Belt where misrepresentation in sociology suppressed it. By maintaining that blacks were not capable of social progress and by failing to consider the social inequality that contributed to their systematic oppression, the sociology produced about black ghetto life largely silenced the black underclass more than it did any beneficial good for the black residents.

Such practice indicates that, at its core, sociology was a discipline that was not written for the black working class even though it was about them. Wright and other novelists used literature to contribute to the discourse about black urban life and race relations more broadly to address matters that academia failed to account for in its scholarship. By producing realist fiction that spoke to how blackness is inaccurately perceived by the American public and that commented on contemporary race relations, Wright helped to undo what sociologists assumed would help to explain the black underclass. Instead, what Park and his contemporaries did was privilege their own interpretations of the black urban experience—as outsiders—rather than utilize more ethical methods to allow Black Belt residents to speak for themselves.

Though Wright learned about the operations of daily life and society through his readings of the Chicago School, it was through his work as a journalist that he witnessed firsthand the systemic racism that plagues the black urban experience and that he would later use to critique social science scholarship. According to Earle V. Bryant, Wright's seven-month stint reporting for the *Daily Worker* in New York City in 1937 yielded stories on such topics as wars in Spain and China, black athletes and musicians, and the Communist Party. Most notably, a great amount of his work from this period focuses on the unbearable housing and living conditions among blacks in Harlem. In such stories as "24 Negro Families Begin Rent Strike in Harlem," "Citizens Ask Committee to Probe Harlem," and "She Lay Dying, but They Would Not Give Her Aid," Wright portrays the harsh realities of black poverty that even black presses such as *New York Ages* and *New York Amsterdam News* shied away from or did not consider newsworthy. Bryant notes that Wright's work with the *Daily Worker* highly influenced his decision to later write about black residential space and urban life in his literary work. I also contend that Wright found another use for his experience in journalism: to engage the inner workings of race and society

that he did not find in the work of the white sociologists. In an article titled, "Opening of Harlem Project Homes Shows How Slums Can Be Wiped Out in New York," Wright declares, "Harlem is New York's shame spot when it comes to housing. The present residences were built years ago for another race and another class of different economic status. The Negro, forced by proscription to live in certain sections of the city, had to take what he could when he fled the South seeking better conditions" (Bryant 53). Unlike Park, Wright pays attention to how race and class intersect to ensure that blacks remain socioeconomically subordinate. Conversely, in "Racial Assimilation in Secondary Groups with Particular Reference to the Negro," Park simply writes that "[t]he segregation of the races, which began as a spontaneous movement on the part of both, has been fostered by the policy of the dominant race" (Park 1914, 617). While Park's observation aligns with Wright's claims, it lacks the nuances that Wright's work carries because Park neither analyzes the "policy**"** that he mentions nor explains the extent to which this policy reinforces the political disenfranchisement of the black underclass. Whereas Park claimed that blacks chose to live separately——that segregation post-Reconstruction began as a "spontaneous movement" by both blacks and whites—Wright's observation stresses that blacks were confined to certain areas of the city based on what was allocated to them (Park 1914, 617). In this way, Wright's journalism testifies to the power that racial residential segregation and civic neglect have in ensuring that blacks remain in a cycle of poverty with little to no agency to change their socioeconomic status.

Wright could only portray the sociopolitical intricacies of the ghettoscape in *Native Son* after working in journalism and drawing on the material that he produced for newspapers. Many scholars have commented on the physical aspects of the ghetto in the novel and how the protagonist navigates them in a failed attempt to escape. Most notably, in "'White People to

Either Side': *Native Son* and the Poetics of Space," Isabel Soto argues that the novel contains both black space and white space: the South Side of Chicago and the places where whites live, respectively. These spaces appear throughout the novel, from the very beginning to the very end and include such moments as when Bigger is standing between two metal beds in his family's cramped kitchenette, when he is squished between Mary Dalton and her boyfriend in a car that he is actually supposed to be driving, and when he is caught by the mob and sits between two policemen in the car ride to the jailhouse. Such instances portray the sense that Bigger has little to no agency to change the current situation or whatever events will further ensue—in all situations he is suffocated by a fear of whiteness. Soto says that the "two vast white looming walls" that make up Mary and her boyfriend's bodies on either side of Bigger in the car represent "an ever-present urban dystopia" that Bigger cannot escape as it exists physically or as "the larger structure and dynamic of power relations within which space is inscribed" (*NS* 67-68, Soto 76). Even though Bigger is depicted in the novel as a tall man who occupies more space than most of the people he encounters, he is constantly positioned as a powerless, small subject in relation to the ever-present institutional systems that prescribe this fate. Similarly, in "Space and Capital in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *Twelve Million Black Voices*," Bill V. Mullen develops a geography of race, maintaining that **"**[i]n *Native Son*, Chicago's South Side is rendered as a privatized terrain of capital which in turns atomizes consciousness and embodies alienation." Mullen figures the capitalist concerns of the city through metaphors of confinement that are found from the very beginning of the novel, when Bigger is trapped between two beds, to the very end when he is trapped in his holding cell. For Mullen, "[c]ompleting the spatial logic of the novel, the cell awaiting Bigger in part three of the book is the kitchenette as 'prison' made literal" (Mullen 2008).

My analysis of *Native Son* engages with these scholarly assessments by demonstrating how Wright employs newspapers to discuss that intersection of race and space. I argue that Wright uses newspapers in *Native Son* as symbols for the discipline of sociology, which restricts black ghetto residents from accessing and producing representative depictions of their lived experience. Even though mass culture became more and more integrated into daily life in the United States at the turn of the century, it failed to report unbiased stories about the marginalized. My work therefore also adds to existing scholarship on mass media in *Native Son* by insisting that Wright considered sociology to work in the same ways as newspapers—both presented information about the black underclass rather than information written with or by the black underclass. Ross Pudaloff cites mass culture as an important part of Bigger's connection to the world around him, noting that it is after Bigger sees Mary in an advertisement at the movies that he decides to look into the job reserved for him at the Dalton residence. Pudaloff notes that with Bigger's insistence on reading his story in the newspaper, "Wright collapses history into the contents of the front page to suggest that Bigger can understand himself only as a product of mass culture at its most destructive" (161-162). Likewise, Farrah Jasmine Griffin maintains that media outlets such as the newspaper construct a narrative of Bigger that he must come to recognize and work against, though she notes that the power behind this story is that Wright shows that his protagonist does not have the education or the economic or social access to comprehend this discourse. According to Griffin, "[w]hen finally he does find a means of resisting it, through the construction of an alternative narrative, another more powerful and more destructive discourse emerges to contain him. The newspaper stories that cover his crime, his flight, his incarceration, and his trial establish him as the oversexed black beast" (125). Whereas Bigger is only able to read about himself in the newspaper, as a working class black man he

cannot even imagine how his subject position in the Black Belt is being written about by sociologists at the University of Chicago nearby. Because Bigger does not possess the educational or cultural capital that allow him to comprehend such academic discourse, the sociological depiction of the Black Belt and its residents, like himself, is an image he cannot resist in the way that Griffin points out he attempts to do with the newspaper.

In the first section of the novel, the newspaper is the site by which death occurs and it is a threatening image that haunts Bigger's experience in the urban terrain. Two central moments in particular position the newspaper as an institution that shields the reality of the black urban experience from public view. The first instance occurs in the opening scene when Bigger uses a newspaper to dispose of a rat that he kills in his family's apartment. The rat represents the everyday living ills of the Black Belt that Bigger and his family face, such as not being able to obtain suitable employment to get out of the deathtrap of the kitchenette and the restrictive covenants that won't allow them to escape the Black Belt even if they could. The rat appears as evidence of the unsatisfactory living conditions that the Thomases are subjected to in their residential confinement to the Black Belt. If the rat represents the stark truth of black urban life, then the newspaper is an emblem of the myths and half-truths told about the Black Belt in the media that is shrouded in whiteness. In this way, Bigger's wrapping the rat inside of the newspaper foregrounds the events that play out in the remainder of the novel: though the dangerous living conditions of the Black Belt are seemingly evident, the newspaper covering the rat so that only the news story is visible indicates that the producers of the news remain oblivious to the facts about life in the ghetto. Moreover, Bigger disposing of the rat with his own hands represents his wish for the truth of his life and the barriers set against him to be shown to the white world. Because the "huge black rat" is also a reflection of Bigger, the details of its death

mirror what will happen to Bigger by the novel's end: though it seems that Bigger has brought his fatal fate upon himself, the rat's dead body covered by the newspaper suggests that the nonfactual representation of Bigger in news stories is what fuels his violent end at the hands of the media and the legal system (*NS* 5).

The newspaper again acts as a mechanism that conceals the truth about the black urban experience when Bigger uses it to catch the blood as he severs Mary's head from her body. It is the image of this bloody head on the newspaper that haunts Bigger the most:

> He wished that he had the power to say what he had done without fear of being arrested; he wished that he could be an idea in their minds; that his black face and the image of his smothering Mary and cutting off her head and burning her could hover before their eyes as a terrible picture of reality which they could see and feel and yet not destroy. (130)

Like the rat, Mary's bloody head is an artifact of the social reality of racism that remains unseen by white people throughout the novel, particularly the reporters covering Mary's murder and Bigger's trial. Unlike the rat, however, Bigger himself conceptualizes Mary's head as a mark of truth, or "a terrible picture of reality." The lingering image of the young woman's head on that document is indicative that whiteness, specifically the white woman, is what ultimately harnesses the power to manipulate the black image in popular discourse. It is therefore important to note that *Native Son*, as Griffin points out, is a black male urban narrative. For Bigger, as a Black man from the South, the white woman will always be an opposing force that he will fear, as indicated by the namesake and climax of the novel's first section. The white woman appears on advertisements and on movie screens throughout the first section as a constant reminder that she represents something that Bigger may desire but cannot touch. Eventually, Bigger is tried and

convicted of sexually assaulting Mary, even though he never committed such a crime. This image of Mary's head on the newspaper inspires Bigger to want to "be an idea in their minds," for Mary's head to haunt the white men as a "terrible picture of reality."

In the second section of the novel, Bigger's engagement with newspapers pivots from a concern with death to self-recognition and the construction of his own true story. Newspapers become more developed within the plot as spaces in which social reality is obscured by misrepresenting Bigger's story. While Bigger is still unidentified as the murder suspect, the death of the heiress becomes known while the Daltons' basement is full of reporters awaiting newsworthy updates on the young woman's case. When Bigger is told to take care of the ashes in the furnace because they are too plentiful, the room fills with smoke. As Bigger is attempting to empty the furnace, the reporters realize that Mary's body was burned when some of her bones appear among the ashes. Where they once were coughing and asking Bigger to open the door for air, they are now vomiting at the sight of human remains. Mary's "tiny, oblong pieces of white bone, cushioned in grey ashes" feature prominently in that they—like the rat and Mary's head—represent a violent truth. The white bone against the contrast of grey ashes extends itself as an image that encompasses the current situation of the Daltons' and Bigger's converging lives: the black poor and working class are the unrecognizable ashes that have been tossed aside while the wealthy white bone remains in a secure dominant position. For Wright, then, it is whiteness at its bare bone that perpetuates black social, economic, and political immobility. This "terrible picture of reality" is what Bigger wants to reinforce in the consciousness of the white men; he wants them to understand that their own subject positions require the silencing of black Americans and the institutional racism blacks face in real estate, education, and employment.

Bigger's willingness to accept false stories about himself if only for some trace of his existence to be circulated in mass culture is an indication of how Bigger's entrapment in the ghetto brings Bigger excitement at the mere thought of his image being reproduced elsewhere. In the second section of the novel, the presence of newspapers reinforces the extent to which Bigger, like Wright himself in *Black Boy*, is meant to be seen but not read or heard by whites until he is assumed to be a source of threat. James Nagel has argued that the novel is "an analysis of 'perception' which documents the effect prejudice, alienation, oppression, and isolation have on one's ability to 'see' and 'be seen' clearly" (86). Nagel draws on the ways in which characters, mostly white, read Bigger and the blindness that they have toward many aspects of his humanity that prevent them from having an honest rendering of his character. Similarly, Louis Tremaine states that because of this misreading, Bigger has a yearning to express himself and portray the true nature of his being that he feels he has been denied. For Tremaine, "[t]his hunger for self-expression is due in part to socio-economic conditions that deny Bigger access to conventional modes of communication, to the tools of language and culture systematically reserved for the use of the dominant race and class" (42). Valerie Smith's argument is perhaps more poignant in asserting that "learning to tell his own story gives [Bigger] a measure of control over his life and releases him from his feelings of isolation" (75). Still, I add that while Bigger eventually obtains a voice to begin articulating his story, at first Bigger's confinement to life in the Black Belt leads him to be initially satisfied with the false newspaper stories. In fact, Bigger is only initially excited about the nonfactual reportage of Mary's death and his escape because it represents a temporary engagement with a class of whites who have previously refused to see him.

Mass media outlets such as newspapers are channels that Bigger associates with the larger world that he feels he himself is not allowed to participate in because of his blackness. Bigger's yearning to be written into media narratives stems from his wanting to be seen by whites who already dominate media spaces and refuse to acknowledge his humanity. Of this correlation between media and Bigger's alienation, the novel says:

> It was when he read the newspapers or magazines, went to the movies, or walked along the streets with crowds, that he felt what he wanted: to merge himself with others and be a part of this world, to lose himself in it so he could find himself, to be allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was black. (240)

All the avenues listed here by which Bigger feels he is able to live freely like others—or whites, more pointedly—are related to the media that circulates around and through the Black Belt but refuses to carry messages about this class of working class blacks in any truthful form. It is apparent here that Bigger equates a life worth living as one in which one can be recognized by others. Bigger understands his image imprinted in the news story in the same way that he experienced Mary on screen at the cinema—it is a manner by which to mark some form of freedom in a world in which he is constantly caged and trapped in cycles of pathology that write him as a danger to society or at risk of failing. Unlike the whites in the novel, Bigger and others in the Black Belt see the racially fragmented world that they are a part of early on even though they do not critically engage them as oppressive forces that can be overcome. Charles Scruggs notes that the effects of racial difference and racism are not noticed by whites because mass media such as newspapers and the movies "forge a myth that the city is still a homogenous whole, still a village of shared values" (Scruggs 74). Though Bigger sees his story as disrupting

that myth, he soon learns that his story as presented in the newspapers only inspires whites to remain blinded by the beliefs that they already hold of him.

As the plot advances, the tension between the whiteness that represents Chicago and the marginal blackness of the Black Belt becomes most recognizable through newspaper imagery. Wright uses the entanglement of black text and white space to reinforce that the power of whiteness controls which images and narratives about blacks circulate publicly and remain associated with blackness, in spite of how unjustified these associations are. Upon the discovery of Mary's remains, Bigger flees to hide in empty South Side kitchenettes and uses the newspaper as a way to find out how his narrative is delivered to the world. Because Bigger has no money but six cents, he decides to steal a newspaper in order to get this information:

> He wanted to see the tall black headline, but the driving snow would not let him. The papers ought to be full of him now. It did not seem strange that they should be, for all his life he had felt that things had been happening to him that should have gone into them. But only after he had acted upon feelings which he had had for years would the papers carry the story, *his* story. He felt that they had not wanted to print it as long as it had remained buried and burning in his own heart. But now that he had thrown it out, thrown it at those who made him live as they wanted, the papers were printing it. (221-222)

Here, Bigger seems to equate himself, as a rather large black man, with the "tall black headline." In wanting to see it, Bigger wants to see himself written into existence, history even, but the snow, an indication of whiteness, does not permit his story to be told correctly. Instead of the dead rat or Mary's head representing that "terrible picture of reality," Bigger himself is now positioned against the newspaper. If the black headline is a representation of Bigger, then his

story can only be visibly read against the backdrop of the white paper, or white people, which holds the text. The white press's manipulation of the black image is also what drives Bigger to own the image that is being painted of him, if only so it proves that he is intelligent enough to plot and execute the crime on his own. When the newspapers report that police suspect that Bigger is an accomplice of Jan, Mary Dalton's boyfriend, Bigger remains defensive of murdering Mary on his own. He wants to approach the nearest police officer to proclaim that he committed the crime himself and Jan had nothing to do with it. In the time before he is arrested, Bigger is so enthralled with the novel concept of appearing in the media that he doesn't ever denounce the fact that he didn't rape Mary as reports claim he did.

The scenes of Bigger's escape and hiding in the Black Belt explore the hold that both the white imagination and white structures of power have over perceptions of the black ghetto. In *Native Son*, Wright suggests that images of black life are only essential to mass media when they are perceived as dangerous to the white public or in conflict with the white agenda of stabilizing control. When they are finally included in the media narratives, these images of black life imply destruction or instability rather than cohesive narratives about the black experience. This is what happens when Bigger acquires the last two newspapers that inform him that a mob of white men is ravishing Chicago's South Side in pursuit of him. A black and white map of the South Side has been printed in the paper, the shaded regions of which indicate where the mob has already searched and in what direction it's heading. In the very last newspaper he secures, Bigger sees a large picture of himself with the headline: "24-HOUR SEACH FAILS TO UNEARTH RAPIST" (255). Up until this point in the novel, Bigger has not witnessed any images of black life in the mass media that he encounters throughout his journeys in the city. For Bigger's image and the repeated etchings of the South Side to be printed in the newspaper for the sole reason of

capturing Bigger means that considerations of black life are only essential for public notice when blacks are seen as disrupting order. The multiple drawings of the South Side, in particular, are included to showcase how much of the area has been covered by the mob in its search for Bigger. Rather than this mentioning of the Black Belt serving the good of the marginal community, the maps present the area as a space of limited resources that can be easily conquered without consequence via the vehicle of white power. Furthermore, the images of Bigger and the Black Belt detail no accurate information about either: Bigger is wrongfully labeled a sex offender and the Black Belt is treated as an area void of human life. Upon realizing that time is running out for him, Bigger thinks to himself: "The one fact to remember was that eight thousand men, white men, with guns and gas, were out there in the night looking for him. According to this paper, they were but a few blocks away" (256). For Wright, the only truths that can be inferred about black urban life in mass media are related to details of its destruction by white power.

Conclusion

Richard Wright's extensive engagement with the black American ghetto raises many issues about black residential space that other cultural producers throughout the twentieth century continued to grapple with in their own depictions and criticisms. As I feature the ghettoscape in my analysis of Wright, in the remaining chapters I show how these two themes continuously appear in other cultural productions that depict the black American ghetto. For Wright, this is a central concept that showcases how much systematic and structural racism contribute to the longevity of blacks within ghettos and the relentless cycles of poverty that blacks cannot escape. To get at the crux of antiblack racism's role in the socioeconomic

dimensions of the black ghetto, I began my analysis by unpacking how Wright comes into his race consciousness in *Black Boy*. Charting Wright's engagement with race in the early twentieth century establishes how racial contracts varied according to geographical location but were nonetheless consistently invested in black inferiority. I argue that Wright depicts black disenfranchisement in the North as a crucial element that thwarts black upward mobility. The memoir and *12 Million Black Voices*, another piece of nonfiction, is a further investigation of the intersection of race and space by highlighting how the spatial elements of the ghetto consistently prevent ghetto dwellers from escaping the confines of their environment. This phenomenon, the ghettoscape, works against the black underclass on every level, both physically and mentally. Finally, as an exploration of how racial discrimination is a key factor in how the black underclass has traditionally been unable to overcome both poverty and the ghetto, Wright's novel, *Native Son*, is a critique of sociological trends in the early twentieth century that failed to account for the underlying structural forces at play in assessments of black urban life.

Chapter Two:
Gwendolyn Brooks and the Ghetto Girl

1968 was a bad year. To date, it remains one of the most racially-tense and violent moments in the struggle for black liberation in United States history. Still fuming from the numerous incidents of civil unrest that occurred earlier in the decade, the year of 1968 is most remembered for the string of protests occurring in the wake of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination on April fourth in Memphis, Tennessee. In response to his death, uprisings broke out in various cities across the nation, including Chicago, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Kansas City, and Detroit.[4] In another sense, 1968 was also a baddDDD year, to reference the poet Sonia Sanchez, one of the central figures of the Black Arts Movement.[5] In spite of the patriarchy that still dominated black resistance efforts throughout the civil rights movement and the 1960s, black women like Sanchez became more visible on their own terms in how they chose to participate in social movements and in the ways they chose to act against injustices targeting them specifically.

Though black women in the United States have always written about their experiences and advocated for their rights and those of others, the year of 1968 represents a moment when

[4] King had been in Memphis to assist in a strike by the black sanitation workers of the city, which was triggered by the death of two workers in garbage compactors and years of unfair pay. This prompted demonstrators to walk city streets with signs bearing the message: I AM A MAN. Years before, in 1966, King had attempted to bring his protest tactics to the North. Choosing Chicago as his primary ground, King sought to aid in activist efforts to bring about open housing, which would break racial segregation barriers that were preventing blacks from owning and renting property in desirable areas. Under the codename of Operation Breadbasket, the plan implemented by King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) meant to shed light on the problems in urban ghettos so that the nation could directly confront them.

[5] Sonia Sanchez's *We a BaddDDD People* was published by Broadside Press in 1970.

the black woman artist and intellectual emerged as a fixed figure on the national stage of political art.[6] That year saw the publication of Alice Walker's *Once* and Audre Lorde's *The First Cities,* both first collections that would conceptualize new literary and intellectual traditions of black feminist and womanist thought.[7] That same year, Sonia Sanchez completed her play, *The Bronx Is Next,* a text that brings the nonviolent civil rights movement face to face with the more direct approach of the 1960s Black Power Movement. Nikki Giovanni used self-generated funds to self-publish her first two collections of poetry, *Black Feeling, Black Talk* and *Black Judgement,* which were later distributed by Detroit's Broadside Press. Additionally, Nina Simone wrote and performed her song "Why? (The King of Love Is Dead)" at the Westbury Music Fair on 7 April 1968, three days after King's assassination. Simone incorporated songs recorded from this performance on her album *'Nuff Said* that was released later that year.[8]

All of these events and cultural productions of varying degrees of badness—or resistance—were collectively born out of the protest energies of the 1960s, especially those that portrayed the need for black space. As the ghetto was solidified as a dwelling place almost exclusively for blacks by 1968, the demand for adequate housing and the urgent eradication of segregation practices in the housing market was marked as a major concern across nearly all social movements during the decade. But what is often missing from discussions of 1960s social movements is how much black women in particular were at the nexus of political engagement and cultural production in more intersectional and nuanced ways than many of their male

[6] Here, I mean to invoke the intersection of art and politics specifically. Before this moment, black women have been written in historical memory and scholarship as either activists-intellectuals or artists. Fueled by the vigor of social movements and resistance efforts in the middle of the twentieth century, black women artists were finally being recognized as intellectuals in their own right by the masses and critiques alike.

[7] Alice Walker went on to coin and define womanism in her nonfiction volume, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Refer to this text for a better understanding of the differences between feminism and womanism.

[8] Also included on the album were studio-recorded tracks such as "Backlash Blues," a protest song written by poet and friend Langston Hughes that previously appeared on *Nina Simone Sings the Blues* (1967).

counterparts in articulating problems related to equal housing. In addition to being on the front lines of grassroots advocacy for racial justice, black women were also producing critical literature, music, and visual art that furthered and complicated discourses on love, sexuality, identity politics, employment, and reproductive rights. Black women used all of these topics to relay keen insights not only about obtaining fair housing and opportunities for public housing, but also about public assistance and the resources necessary for furthering the fight for space.

Like many of these Black women artists, Gwendolyn Brooks was concerned with the sociopolitical climate that victimized black women within discourse about the black family, welfare reform, and public housing reform. *In the Mecca* (1968), her fourth major volume of poetry, is a cornerstone for understanding the sociopolitical boundaries of the black ghettoscape in the 1960s and the representation of black women within such discourse. The first poem in the collection, also the book's namesake, is named for Chicago's famed, now demolished building, the Mecca Flats. The poem offers a critique of the tangible effects of the urban crisis on the black underclass by examining one specific evening at the home of Mrs. Sallie, a single black mother of nine who returns from work to discover that her young daughter, Pepita, is missing. In her search to locate her daughter, Mrs. Sallie encounters a host of Meccans, all of whom are unhelpful and solely concerned with whatever is happening in their own lives. Mrs. Sallie serves as a response to sociologist Patrick E. Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), or the Moynihan Report. Though the black family unit has been a topic of intellectual inquiry at least since the publication of W. E. B. DuBois's *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) and became a solidified scholarly field of its own with the publication of E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939), Moynihan's Report remains the most controversial research document about black life in the twentieth century. In his assessment of

the black family and possibilities for incorporating blacks into the body politic of the nation, Moynihan claimed that blacks were not socioeconomically progressing because of the high percentage of broken black homes and the sharp decrease in the nuclear family unit that was deteriorating since slavery. He concluded that black women were at fault for neglecting their family by being employed, emasculating their male partners, and/or seeking to maintain a life of poverty through welfare dependency.

In this chapter, I provide new insight into Gwendolyn Brooks's work by arguing that "In the Mecca"—as a rebuttal to the victimization of single black working class mothers within welfare reform discourse—represents some of her most political writing. I maintain that Brooks destabilizes popular stereotypes about working class and poor black women in the 1960s era of welfare reform through the characterization of her female protagonist. In writing against damaging motifs of the black matriarch and the welfare mother, Brooks redirects prescriptive images of black urban womanhood to highlight the social and political complexities that influence black women to be read as unmotivated, damaging members of their families. Specifically, by using double-meaning language that suggests malnutrition, depicting the kitchen as a ghettoscape that works against her protagonist, and demonstrating how the state participates in the disenfranchisement of black communities through Mrs. Sallie's engagement of the police, Brooks uncovers the structural barriers that prevent working class mothers from overcoming poverty. In that the Moynihan Report was a sociological study funded by the American government that had profound consequences for the black working class, a major part of Brooks's political engagement with "In the Mecca" is challenging sociological discourse that attempted to understand people like her characters who lived along the social, economic, and

political margins of society. Brooks's engagement with the sociopolitical treatment of ghetto life and black women in "In the Mecca," then, advances the black agenda of obtaining racial justice.

Though the second half of *In the Mecca* is mostly concerned with black men, I demonstrate that the first section and title poem of the volume are more involved with women's issues than Brooks and critics have previously thought. This intervention concerning the political nature of Brooks's writing not only leans into the critical reception of her work but also challenges ideas that the writer herself held. Brooks remained ambivalent about both the political agenda of her work and her feelings toward women's rights. When asked in 1974 about her thoughts on the women's liberation movement, Brooks replied that she was disturbed by how many women in the movement despised men. Describing the women's liberation movement as "another divisionary tactic that we need to be very wary of," Brooks stated that "[w]e should be about *Black liberation*—which includes women and men" (Brooks 2003 83, emphasis hers). In a 1977 interview with Gloria Hull, Brooks noted that some women who loved her poems because they were about women must not have read *In the Mecca*, where she thought such poems began to disappear from her books.

My analysis shifts critical reception away from debates about the urban decline of the Mecca Building where the poem is centered and instead focuses on the urban crisis in order to demonstrate that Brooks is participating in a body of discourse that critiques systems of political power imposed on the black American ghetto. By demonstrating Brooks's engagement with the urban crisis rather than urban decline, my work foregrounds Brooks's depiction of sociopolitical injustice in the second half of her career, a topic that has yet to be fully explored. While Brooks's explicit interests in black consciousness and the black aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement are often noted within scholarship on her work after her visit to the Black Writers Conference at Fisk

University in 1967, few have noted the political engagement within *In the Mecca*.[9] A focus on urban decline highlights the physical life of the Mecca Flats building itself, which began to deteriorate as a result of white residents taking their socioeconomic resources with them when they fled for the suburbs to avoid integrated neighborhoods. Unlike urban decline, the urban crisis is more concerned with how people were affected by these residential and political maneuvers. The urban crisis, for example, considers the larger conversations on feminism and welfare rights. Notions of urban decline within Gwendolyn Brooks scholarship do not get at the specifics of the intersection of race, gender, politics, and domestic space with which Brooks is grappling. For example, scholars such as B. J. Bolden have noted the ways in which Brooks participates in social commentary. Bolden states:

> Brooks…is, and always has been, a 'citizen poet' who uses the daily activities of the Black, urban population of Bronzeville to depict the many facets of their American reality. By creating vignettes that characterize the lives of everyday people in their urban ghetto, Brooks dramatizes the microcosm of Black life in America by creating a poetic portraiture of the afflictions caused by their poverty-ridden and racially divisive living conditions and an astute portrayal of their stoic responses. (xii)

[9] After communing with young writers such as Sonia Sanchez, Don L. Lee (now Haki Madhubuti), Nikki Giovanni, and Amiri Baraka at the Second Black Writers Conference at Fisk University in 1967, Brooks grew more aware of the urgency of using her poetic voice to develop the social and political aspects of her work. By this time, Brooks was coming into her 50s, and having already won the 1950 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and assumed the position of Poet Laureate for Illinois in 1968, she was also coming into her status as a veteran poet in the national field of arts and letters. Still, she thought it important that she fully invest in the production and business of conscious black art. After the publication of *In the Mecca*, Brooks declared that her "urgent compulsion" was "to reach all manner of black people" (Brooks 2003 68)**.** For her, that meant adjusting her writing so that it could be read by blacks from all walks of life, from those who had little exposure to poetry to those who were very comfortable with it. This is why she transitioned from writing sonnets to incorporating free verse with its "raw, ragged, uneven time" (Brooks 2003 68)**.** In wanting to reach more blacks with her work, Brooks thought it also necessary to support black presses that were establishing literary homes for black authors. *In the Mecca* was her last project published with Harper and Row, her publisher for twenty-five years. The following year, her next book, *Riot* (1969), was published with Detroit's Broadside Press, which was founded by black poet Dudley Randall.

Bolden reads Brooks's works as social critique because they display the quotidian and intimate landscape of black poverty that is not often broadcasted outside of its own space. In noting Brooks's engagement with the urban crisis, I posit that her work in *In the Mecca* is also political in the way that it challenges policy and notions about black motherhood pushed by the state-sponsored Moynihan Report. While Norris B. Clark has commented on the political nature of Brooks's work, he does so primarily in considering the poet's black aesthetic (84). Courtney Thorsson writes a more compelling analysis that dictates that "[t]he possibility for political change is not in legislation, not in the nation-state, but rather in daily affairs and black female interiority" (160). While I agree with Thorsson's alignment of Brooks's work with the second-wave feminist notion that "the personal is political," I part ways with the argument that Brooks's work is not civically engaged. By also identifying Brooks's work as an agent of sociopolitical change, I demonstrate the ways in which "In the Mecca" was one of Brooks's strongest poems to challenge the systematic politics of welfare reform and other civic policies and programs denied to the black underclass.

Brooks was able to depict black urbanity in Chicago through notions of the everyday without rendering her characters as simple, one-dimensional spectacles because she herself was a longtime resident of Bronzeville. Though born in Topeka, Kansas in 1917, Brooks moved with her family to Chicago within the first few weeks of her life. She would spend the rest of her life in the city, using her community as the inspiration for much of her poetry. Bronzeville itself is rich in cultural history as it is known as a historically black neighborhood where many migrants made their home after relocating from the South. Named by an editor of the *Chicago Bee*, a black newspaper, for the color of the people who lived there, Bronzeville was home to many poor and illiterate people, who were nonetheless diligent, dignified, and creative (Jackson 1).

Bronzeville was home to blacks who fit in many places across the socioeconomic spectrum, from highly-regarded teachers to domestics and day laborers. Brooks's poetry reflected this variation in black life but also celebrated the everyday moments and thoughts of a predominantly working class urban black community. In her first collection, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), Brooks explores the everyday through the perspective of the domestic. She writes about nightlife, childhood, motherhood, and abortion in the lives of her characters in such a way that respectfully draws out the distinctness of black life. In this way, her vivid imagery of the everyday reads as familiarity rather than as exotic characters of a completely different world. In *Annie Allen* (1949), Brooks employs the epic to relay the journey of a black woman from childhood through adulthood in the interwar period. Both of these poetic volumes serve as primers for her novella, *Maud Martha* (1953), which is composed of 34 vignettes detailing the personal growth, marriage, and pregnancy of her protagonist and the experiences of people in the protagonist's community. Brooks's idea for writing about the Mecca Flats developed from her own experience of working there as the assistant to a spiritual advisor, who is characterized in the book as Prophet Williams. As her first job out of junior college, Brooks helped to answer letters and bottle medicine that she delivered throughout the building (Brooks and Stavros 15-16).

Whereas in the previous chapter I argued that Wright indicates that the ghetto is capable of inflicting psychological damage on the black underclass, in this chapter I point to the ways that Gwendolyn Brooks centers her discussion of the ghetto on the sociopolitical stakes it poses for black women and children specifically. By describing an array of characters in her long poem, Brooks also attends to the fact that by the 1960s, the ghetto occupied a permanent place within American culture. She indicates that there is no single ghetto story in writing against the notion that all Meccans were hopelessly impoverished and instead draws on language and

symbols that portray them as culturally diverse, emphasizing that each possessed their own feelings, hopes, and connections to the world around them. In "In the Mecca," Brooks suggests that negative representations of black poverty within the media influenced welfare reform critics to restrict the federal benefits extended to blacks. Where Wright's treatment of the ghetto is told through the subjectivity of the black male, Brooks centers the experiences of single black mothers that were not often shared in the public arena. "In the Mecca" pivots away from Wright's focus on the individual to focus on the political consequences of misrepresenting the black urban poor. In his writings from the 1940s, Wright maintains that blacks living in ghettos develop a mentality of complacency by learning to exist in a culture that prolongs their sociopolitical disenfranchisement. Brooks, writing twenty years after Wright, uncovers how systematic perpetuations of black stereotypes, especially those related to black women, are harmful political tactics that thwart black progress. As the role of the law is integral to the poem's conclusion, Brooks shows that her protagonist is fully aware of her inferior status as an impoverished black mother and is therefore skeptical about how effective law officials will be in helping to locate her missing daughter.

The ghettoscape depicted in *In the Mecca* differs from Wright's because it represents an urban landscape more influenced by policy in the aftermath of World War II and the heightened visibility that working class black areas received in the 1960s due to the federal government's focus on poverty and public housing reform in an attempt to fix the ghetto. Brooks's shift from describing homely kitchenettes of Bronzeville in her early works in the 1940s to focusing on the "great grey stone building" in *Maud Martha* in the 1950s marks a shift in the formation of American cities when high-rises began to be read as the face of black poverty (Brooks 1987, 202). In major cities such as Chicago, public funding went to construct high-rise public housing

complexes in the 1950s and early 1960s in the heart of ghetto areas in hopes of reforming public housing, or the slums found in Wright's work, most especially as part of President Johnson's War on Poverty. Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh notes that even though these buildings were meant to conjure the appeal of advancement and revitalization, they were often symbols of isolation and helplessness because they stood in the center of extreme poverty. In this way, the ghetto became more visibly seen and experienced as a "city within a city" (Venkatesh 7-8). Though the Mecca Flats was gone when Brooks published "In the Mecca," its history and that of the surrounding Bronzeville area mirrors these national public housing trends. Before 1960, public housing in the United States was largely racially segregated and catered to whites. It was seen as a stepping stone to home ownership, especially for young families. Edward D. Goetz maintains that an increase in household incomes in the post-Depression era gave whites the means to relocate to new suburban communities being established in major metropolitan areas. Blacks, remaining victims of racially discriminatory housing markets, often saw public housing as the best opportunity for themselves. With little demand from whites after the Depression, housing projects grew to be identified with black and brown people over time (Goetz 7). While mention of the ghetto today generally invokes images and notions of public housing projects, the two are not always synonymous. Defining the black American ghetto as a space that is often occupied by the working class and poor and significantly lacks sustainable resources and civic support, I consider the Mecca Flats a ghetto because of its history of white flight, its geographical location on the South Side of Chicago, and its reception in citywide and national news coverage as a slum. Civic support for the building and surrounding areas lessened as whites moved away from the South Side, leaving Meccans to fend for themselves.

In less than fifty years, the Mecca Flats transformed from the epitome of apartment living in Chicago to the centerpiece of slum dwelling in the entire United States. Formerly located on 34th Street and State Street four miles south of downtown in Bronzeville, the Mecca Flats was designed for upper class whites and guests arriving for the World's Colombian Exposition that was hosted in Chicago in 1893. Nothing the Mecca Flats's distinct and innovative architectural designs, Daniel Bluestone states that "[t]he Mecca's simple Romanesque-style elevations, with their arched entrances and round-arched, top-floor windows, rippled with projecting window bays and the play of shadows cast by the cornice and stringcourses" (383). Because of its mere density, the Mecca was a new fixture within the novel idea of apartment living as opposed to single family housing. Nevertheless, as more blacks moved north to Cities like Chicago, whites evaded residential integration by relocating from areas where racial minorities congregated. The change in demographics motivated the owners of the Mecca Flats to convert its apartments to smaller kitchenettes that would accommodate more residents and thus yield greater profit. In June 1900, a United States census surveyor counted 107 units housing 356 people (Bluestone 390). In the late 1910s, the Mecca was just a block away from Chicago's burgeoning black business district and was a leading locale for black life and entertainment in the urban North (Bluestone 392).[10] By 1950, the Mecca had 176 apartments with so many residents that they could not all be accounted for. As one Mecca resident told a reporter, "There's 176 apartments and some of 'em's got seven rooms and they're all full" (Martin 89). Another resident reported that people were sleeping in bathtubs, under kitchen sinks, or wherever they could find space

[10] In addition to the many leading jazz clubs that called the area home, such visiting musicians as Louise Armstrong, King Oliver, and Jelly Roll Morton contributed to the cultural vivaciousness that surrounded the Mecca Flats. Jazz was so imprinted into the quotidian of the Mecca Flats that musicians began to play and record variations on a blues tune called the "Mecca Flat Blues." Pianist and composer James "Jimmy" Blythe and vocalist Priscilla Stewart were the first to record the song in August 1924 and their version remains the most popular. Various tunes surfaced later, each detailing the trials and tribulations of life in the Mecca Flats (Bluestone 392).

(Martin 89). In a 1950 *Harper's Magazine* article, "The Strangest Place in Chicago," John Bartlow Martin describes the Mecca as "one of the most remarkable Negro slum exhibits in the world" (87). In language that likens the building to its earlier days as a showpiece, Martin describes the Mecca Flats as U-shaped with a "dirt courtyard" (87). Where marble once lined the lower walls of the vestibule, it was ripped off to expose the brick underneath. The arms of the U are identical, each an extending hall parallel to the other on either side of the courtyard below. Four flights above the courtyard sits a skylight, which constitutes much of the roof. Along the walls run three balconies that are guarded by a decorative wrought-iron grill. Off these balconies are the doors leading to the individual apartments, a setup that Martin likens to "tiers of cells in a prison cellblock" (87). African American journalist Vernon Jarrett called the Mecca Flats "the queen of slums" and "one of the more notorious slum dwellings in the history of modern urban society." Jarrett says that it was impossible for any Chicagoan to not know about the apartment building because of the varied stories in circulation about crimes committed and reported there. The Mecca Flats was eventually acquired by the nearby Illinois Institute of Technology (ITT) and demolished in 1952 to expand the ITT campus.

In *In the Mecca*, we see that by the 1960s the ghetto had become a fixed idea in the American imaginary as a holding cell of black urban life. Replacing "the slum" that Wright would have used, the ghetto as a widespread space and experience in major metropolitan areas was generally discussed without regard to region. In this sense, though Brooks is specifically writing about Chicago, "In the Mecca" can be read as an examination of the collective energy found in ghettos and urban uprisings throughout the 1960s. This mission begins in the poem's title, which it shares with the book. By employing a prepositional phrase, Brooks makes it apparent that she is writing from the interior of the Mecca Flats with an acute knowledge of its

history and its inhabitants. The title alone draws readers into the Mecca's territory that was often warned against. Though people knew where and what the Mecca was, 1950s newspaper reports indicate that there was no reason for anyone to enter the building if they didn't live there. By writing against a narrative that constructs the Mecca as a violent area to avoid, the poem's title pays homage to the cultural significance that the Mecca Flats had on black life and on Chicago's South Side during the Jazz Age of the 1920s. Brooks's title also carries a double meaning in its invocation of the word "mecca" as a holy place or an area that attracts people of similar interests.

Mass media depictions of blacks in poverty, the Moynihan Report, and discourse of welfare reform all contributed to the fixity of the black American ghetto as immobile. Although his report lives on as an incendiary document in American history and culture, Moynihan was perpetuating the conflation of blackness and poverty that was created by the media. Although many whites were also living in poverty, blacks became associated with the negative effects of poverty and welfare in the 1960s. The Moynihan Report was released in the midst of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty that aimed to decrease class disparities and modify President Roosevelt's New Deal, which promised blacks support and opportunities for advancement that it never delivered. When it was created in 1935 as part of the New Deal, the welfare program known as Aid to Dependent Children catered primarily to whites and excluded black women. During this time, welfare was seen as a noble resource that families in need could access without fears of judgement. Welfare recipients were only seen as devious once blacks became eligible for benefits in the 1960s and once black women grew politically active in demanding that welfare reform clearly reflect their needs (Gilens 102). Whereas welfare reformers in the past argued for access to welfare based on eligibility, in the 1960s they began to envision welfare as a human right (Patterson 96). According to Martin Gilens, before the 1960s,

images of poverty in the national news were primarily displayed as a white problem (101). Blacks became the focal point of poverty between 1965 and 1967 as the civil rights movement was coming to an end and the onset of urban uprisings in major metropolitan areas became apparent. Nevertheless, Gilens maintains that it was actually negative reporting that is chiefly responsible for how images of poverty racially changed. Sympathetic news coverage of poverty was mostly associated with whites, while blacks took the face of poverty only after negative stories about the War on Poverty appeared in headlines (Gilens 126). Gilens argues that "the news media's overrepresentation of blacks among the poor and in particular the association of African Americans with the least sympathetic aspects of poverty serve to perpetuate negative racial stereotypes that serve to lessen public support for efforts to fight poverty in general, and black poverty in particular" (127).

Reclaiming the Right to Welfare

In "In the Mecca," Brooks writes against popular damaging notions of black poverty and black motherhood by attending to the institutional circumstances that place and keep blacks in the ghetto, factors often ignored by particular sociological trends at the time aimed at studying the black urban poor and the black family structure when ghettos across the country remained in a state of social unrest. These sociological studies attempted to peer into the social reality of the black underclass to uncover the social structures responsible for the cycles of poverty among communities of color, often blaming blacks for their own socioeconomic immobility. I point to one social scientist in particular, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, to expound on the sociological terrain that Brooks is writing against. Using the work of Patrica Hill Collins, I highlight the specific stereotypes of the black matriarch and welfare mother that Moynihan is invested in exploiting.

Finally, I demonstrate that Brooks debunks these stereotypes by superimposing the structural problems of governance that plague single black women in the ghetto. I show that Brooks's poem leads to a better understanding of the sociopolitical bounds that are profound challenges to working class black women's upward mobility and their ability to leave the ghetto.

Though Brooks tended to publicly distance her work from political and social critique, close examination of her writing reveals that she was very intentional in writing "In the Mecca" as a response to sociological discourse on the black urban poor. In her memoir, *Report from Part One* (1972), Brooks explicitly states that the initial idea for a book-length poem of two thousand lines or more about the Mecca Flats "will not be a statistical report" (189). There is little question that Brooks was exhausted by the damaging effects of social science-based reports that attempted to measure black life without accounting for its inherent nuances and variations and, more importantly, the systematic social and political dynamics that influenced the way that working class and poor blacks lived. Though there is little evidence that she was in contact with any social scientists or engaged in any public debates about the role of academic scholarship as it pertains to the study of black urban life, Brooks lived and worked in the same urban milieu from which the Chicago School of Sociology chose and studied its subjects. Writing on the ground and outside of academia, Brooks rejected this scholarly approach to considerations of black life:

> I'm interested in a certain detachment, but only as a means of reaching substance with some incisiveness. I wish to present a large variety of personalities against a mosaic of daily affairs, recognizing that the grimmest of these is likely to have a streak or two streaks of sun. (189)

Brooks turned to poetry as a means to portray the complexities of a variety of experiences within the ghetto instead of privileging decrepit imagery of black poverty already prevailing within the

public domain. “In the Mecca” rewrites the ghetto narrative by divesting from stereotypical notions of black poverty in favor of extracting the individual experience. For this reason, Brooks notes that “[t]o touch every note in the life of this block-long blockwide building would be to capsulize the gist of black humanity in general” (190).[11]

In “In the Mecca,” Brooks aims to underscore the structural barriers preventing single black mothers from overcoming poverty and the ghetto that trump whatever will they may have to do so themselves. She challenges Moynihan’s notions of the black matriarch and the welfare mother by scripting a black mother of nine with an ambiguous marital status as the protagonist of her long poem. Combating traditional notions of the family structure and advocating for women’s right to choose their own form of companionship, Brooks deliberately gives her protagonists the title of “Mrs.” As the first line indicates: “S. Smith is Mrs. Smith” (Brooks 407). Because this poem takes place in an apartment building, Mrs. Sallie’s introduction makes reference to the actual mailboxes that lined the atrium of the Mecca Flats. Introducing Mrs. Sallie in this way also serves as a command or a corrective to refer to her as she wishes and deserves to be called. Emphasizing that her name is *Mrs*. Sallie gives her an air of dignity historically denied to black women, who were not seen as proper women by white society. Nevertheless, this connection to respectability is immediately undercut once there is no mention of a husband in Mrs. Sallie’s household. Mrs. Sallie’s husband could be deceased, away for work, not home yet to take part in the poem’s evening-long event, or he could have altogether abandoned the family. Mrs. Sallie could have also left him and taken her children with her to the

[11] Though I don’t include an analysis of it in this chapter, Brooks’s message of hope to black ghetto dwellers can be found in “The Sermon on the Warpland” and “The Second Sermon on the Warpland,” the last two poems in *In the Mecca*. In these pieces—and “The Third Sermon on the Warpland” that would later appear in 1969’s *Riot*—Brooks reimagines the urban terrain of the 1960s as a whirlwind. She instructs blacks, in spite of the sociopolitical racial tension in liberation efforts, to “Nevertheless, live./ Conduct your blooming in the noise and whip of the whirlwind” (*Blacks 256*).

Mecca Flats. Whatever the case, Brooks's choice to not name or mention a husband or father figure in Mrs. Sallie's household leads readers to speculate about his absence for themselves. Still, the poem's events happen so swiftly and the host of characters is so vast that this male figure almost goes unnoticed by readers, as it seemingly has by literary critiques for decades.

Because her name is not reflective of the social aspects of her life as presented in the poem, Mrs. Sallie straddles the line between two popular images of black women in the latter half of the twentieth century: the matriarch and the welfare mother. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000), Patricia Hill Collins contends that portraying black women through stereotypes such as the mammy, matriarch, welfare queen, and whore helps to provide justification for their intersectional oppression as both blacks and women. According to Collins, "[b]ecause the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about black womanhood" (76). I employ Collins's work here to examine the ways in which the Moynihan Report was most harmful to black women socially and politically. By giving significance to the traditional patriarchal model of the American family and using it as a controlled variable to analyze black families, Moynihan perpetuated stereotypes about black women as emasculating their male partners and as threats to the mental health of their children. Though the descriptions of these typecasts detail that they are providing for their families in some way or working diligently to overcome the poverty that has claimed their lives, Moynihan's Report solidified single black women as dangers to the social order.

Secondly, Collins's insights about the controlling images of the matriarch and welfare mother help to decode the obscure characterization of Mrs. Sallie. Brooks blurs the lines of black womanhood as represented in social science by not giving her protagonist any specific traits of

either stereotype of the matriarch or the welfare mother, both of whom are considered "bad" mothers. Collins explains that the matriarch developed as a racialized symbol in the 1960s, though it was already a category within scholarship on the black family as early as the 1940s, such as that of E. Franklin Frazier. Moynihan considers the matriarch to be someone who has abandoned her womanly duties at home in order to work and provide for her family, essentially assuming her husband's role as breadwinner of the household. While the matriarch was thought to be a danger to civil society because her children would not receive the attention that married, nonworking white mothers were able to give their children and would thus be mentally underdeveloped, Collins maintains that this idea "diverts attention from the political and economic inequalities that increasingly characterize global capitalism" (84). The idea that the matriarch represents bad parenting introduces the idea that anyone can rise out of poverty; it distracts from the harsh realities of underfunded schools, employment discrimination, and housing inequalities (Collins 84).

While the matriarch works to provide for her family, the welfare mother—an early iteration of the welfare queen image appearing in the 1970s—is often considered a working-class black woman who abuses federal welfare funding.[12] Collins contends, instead, that the moniker of welfare mother is tied to any lower-income black woman who is only making use of federal funds to which she is entitled. Collins maintains that "[a]s long as poor Black women were denied social welfare benefits, there was no need for this stereotype. But when U.S. Black women gained more political power and demanded equity in access to state services, the need

[12] In a 1976 presidential campaign speech, Ronald Reagan was first to nationally vilify a Chicago woman of welfare fraud, whom he claimed registered various names, addresses, and telephone numbers to collect food stamps, Social Security, welfare, and veteran benefits for four nonexistent deceased husbands. However, it was the *Chicago Tribune* that first dubbed her the "welfare queen" (Bliss 3). Identified as Linda Taylor, the woman in question began serving a prison sentence for welfare fraud in 1977. After completing the sentence, she changed her name and fled from the public eye.

arose for this controlling image" (86). Brooks's poem does not indicate that Mrs. Sallie makes use of the welfare system, but everything else about her represents a woman who would otherwise be considered a welfare mother: she has a considerable number of children whose father is absent, her family lives in what is classified as a slum, her children eat meager meals, and she works a blue collar job. Both the images of the matriarch and the welfare mother grew out of the need to contain black women, hence Collins's language of the "controlling image," and they are testaments that language wields power over the marginalized who cannot easily detach themselves from stereotypes that images may perpetuate. As the following analysis demonstrates, Mrs. Sallie fits no particular stereotype of either the matriarch or the welfare queen and therefore challenges readers to see beyond the control that dangerous, popular images have over how black women are read and perceived.

The poem opens as the beginning of a journey that finds Mrs. Sallie returning home from a draining day of work:

> S. Smith is Mrs. Sallie. Mrs. Sallie
> hies home to Mecca, hies to marvelous rest;
> ascends the sick and influential stair.
> The eye unrinsed, the mouth absurd
> with the last sourings of the master's Feast. (407)

Mrs. Sallie has already had an eventful day as indicated by her quickened steps to reach her home and indulge in repose. Referencing the Bible, the last line hints toward Mrs. Sallie's work as either a domestic or a food service worker. In the New Testament, the master of the feast is a guest who is appointed head server of a meal and is also in charge of the evening's main event. This person was charged with making sure guests had enough to eat and drink. If they were

successful in this endeavor, they would be offered a wreath at the end of the evening. Rather than Mrs. Sallie being a dignified guest, Brooks's manipulation of the biblical reference (John 2:9) reflects the economy of black women's labor within white homes where they were considered dispensable and sometimes treated very poorly for the service they provided. Brooks changes the scripture from "the master of the feast" to read "the master's Feast" to portray the authority whites assumed they had over blacks in the modern era even a century after slavery was abolished. In this way, Brooks alludes to the tiresome, domestic work that Mrs. Sallie performs in a white home as both cook, server, and general caretaker of someone else's family. Such work was common for black women, who for the most part were not offered other employment opportunities beyond labor intensive jobs and work in the homes of whites.

The juxtaposition of adjectives and double meaning inform the dichotomy between Mrs. Sallie's arduous labor and her low socioeconomic status. Mrs. Sallie considers her own underpaid labor as she is so much in a rush to flee her work that she has yet to clear her headspace from it—her eye, or worldview, remains unchanged from the stress and strain she has endured all day. Moreover, the absurdity of her mouth derives from all the things she cannot say at work while also referencing the nearly soured food that she takes home. As a black domestic, Mrs. Sallie must remain seen and not heard in the same ways that Wright's protagonist must learn to do in *Black Boy*. Unlike Wright's protagonist, Mrs. Sallie recognizes the value in maintaining this docile behavior because it ensures that she is able to remain employed to take care of her family, no matter how much not fully expressing herself leads to silent frustration. Nevertheless, part of Mrs. Sallie's absurdity is due to her having to use the last morsels of food that is rummaged from her place of employment. Through this absurdity, we discover that Mrs. Sallie is able to ascend the stair but is not allowed opportunities for upward mobility. For this

reason, the stair—the ghettoscape of the Mecca Flats itself—is both "sick" and "influential" because it details so much about her predicament between wanting a more comfortable life but facing adversity in the process of trying to do so. For as much as the Mecca Flats was influential in its heyday, Mrs. Sallie experiences it through hardship. Her ascension of the stairs represents her leaving the subservient role of servant and assuming the more empowering roles of mother and matriarch. Once she "rises to the final and fourth floor" that houses her apartment, Mrs. Sallie can finally "set severity apart/ to unclench the heavy folly of the fist" as she cannot do at work. Again, the juxtaposition of "severity" and "folly" suggest the ways in which her calculated performance in white spaces contributes to feelings of frustration and containment as suggested by the fist that is heavy with emotional toil. In this respect, "marvelous rest" doesn't indicate a total disengagement with the white upper class so much as it does a moment in which Mrs. Sallie can truly become her full self without social restriction.

Brooks scripts many of the details about Mrs. Sallie's family and her home through food and malnutrition in order to complicate welfare reform discourse that was often about families' access to food. Again, Brooks's adjectives are double meanings that dissect the complexities of how Mrs. Sallie appears to the outsider and how she sees herself. Though Mrs. Sallie cannot immediately abandon the same duties she has as a domestic even as she returns to her own home and has to care for her own family, she is afforded more freedom in her home to creatively express herself while preparing dinner for her family. This is seen in her cooking materials and methods:

> Children, what she has brought you is hock of ham.
> She puts the pieces to boil in white enamel, right
> already with water of many seasonings, at the back

of the cruel stove. And mustard mesmerized by
eldest daughter, the Undaunted (she who once
pushed her thumbs in the eyes of a Thief), awaits
the clever hand. Six ruddy yams abide, and
cornbread made with water. (410)

Comprising a meal that would be considered traditionally Southern, the food alone contextualizes Mrs. Sallie as a Southern migrant or a descendant of migrants who moved to Chicago for better opportunities but nevertheless got caught within cycles of poverty. Her excitement about salvaging these already inexpensive food items from someone else's home says volumes about her low socioeconomic status. The verse describing the dinner seemingly leaves nothing on the stove to be desired, delectable, or even edible as the yams give off a reddish, bloody appearance. Even the cornbread, made with water instead of the richness of buttermilk for flavor, is telling that Mrs. Sallie cannot afford to buy this to add to the meagerness of her dinner. Brooks describes the dinner in this way to portray a sense of how unpleasant this scene may appear to someone unfamiliar with these items. Her deliberate use of this imagery is not meant to vilify her characters, but to indicate how their life of poverty is viewed by outsiders as "otherness" even though these are the same items that she used in her cooking at her employer's home. When placed within Mrs. Sallie's home in the ghetto, the food items allude to an unhealthy diet that only the poor would consume for lack of better options. Even the mustard greens, which carry the most appealing color of the meal, are the most bitter of the commonly eaten greens. They signify that Mrs. Sallie's meal, and perhaps her life, is gathered from the bitter ends of someone else's.

Nevertheless, a closer look at Brooks's adjectives demonstrate that she is attending to the resourcefulness with which impoverished black women repurpose what little is afforded them to provide for their families. Her adjectives also indicate that while outsiders may see Mrs. Sallie as unmotivated and complacent in poverty, that she is imagining and working beyond this gaze. Take, for instance, the "ruddy" color of the yams. While the yams may look unpleasant, to the cook their color represents a heartiness that will go a long way. In this way, her "clever hand"—now transformed from "the heavy folly of the fist"—was right in seeing the potential in food that others saw as contaminated and is creative in putting the food to good use.

As in much of her poetry, Brooks explores how children are mentally and physically affected by the environment in which they are reared. In this poem, Mrs. Sallie's children are embodied through the language of illness and malnutrition in ways that underscore the ghettoscape of the Mecca Flats to which they belong. The children's aversion to materialistic possession is in part a disguise for their lack of a sound diet. For instance, Melodie Mary's hatred of "everything pretty and plump" is the equivalent of Emmett, Cap, and Casey's "skin wiped over bones/for lack of chub and chocolate" (411, 414). Such descriptions are ripe with imagery of material want that portray accessibility and abundance rather than material need. These adjectives contrast with the bodily descriptions of the children, who are so thin that "plump" becomes representative of healthy eating habits rather than the gluttony inherent within it. The lack of both "chub," or fish, and chocolate indicate that both hearty food and sweets are absent from their daily meals. Though they have little food, what they do eat does not necessarily allow them to grow in a manner that suggests they are well fed. Like many important matters in the poem, these short but vivid descriptions go almost unnoticed. But this is food that they desperately need, for as the speaker says, "What shall their redeemer be?/ Greens and hock of

ham./ For each his greens and hock of ham /and a spoon of sweet potato" (414). The children's "redeemer" is two-fold: it questions restrictive welfare policy while also insisting that the salvaged food must serve as dinner. Through the children's disdain of certain foods and possessions and the mere spoonful of food they are fed, Brooks pushes against the myth of the welfare mother as offered by Moynihan and welfare queen rhetoric by instead pointing to the ways that black working class mothers care for their families and maintain sustainable home environments for their children.

In the same way that the ghetto was constructed as a racial enclave to segregate nonwhites from certain areas of the city, much of welfare reform discourse prevented blacks from achieving an upwardly mobile status. In Brooks's poem, this idea again goes back to the representation of food and malnutrition. While it may seem that Brooks is simply expounding on how poor the family is, her mention of the children's thin bodies refers to the food that Mrs. Sallie is preparing at the beginning of the poem. By explaining that Mrs. Sallie's family is on a diet of food taken from her higher-class employers, Brooks points blame not to Mrs. Sallie, but to the structural socioeconomic forces that don't allow her to provide more food for her family. As the poem shows, Mrs. Sallie has a job to provide for her family but still gets excited at the prospect of the leftovers because they offer a relief to her low income. Because black women did not have access to better forms of employment, Mrs. Sallie's work as a domestic is not expendable, but one of few options she has to make an honest living. Malnutrition, in this instance, stems not from the food itself, but the source—Mrs. Sallie's employers who reap the benefits of capitalism denied to the black underclass. In this way, Brooks indicates that the effects of poverty are not insular to the ghetto but derive from exterior motives of racial discrimination.

The immediate conflict between Mrs. Sallie's search for rest amongst all the tasks she must complete is in complete contradiction with the faulty images of the matriarch and the welfare mother put forth in Moynihan's Report. Where these two stereotypes indicate that Mrs. Sallie would have an unstable work-life balance in one instance and exhibit laziness in the other, Brooks maintains that her protagonist is resilient in maintaining the responsibilities of her household, despite the mental strain of barely finding time to recharge. For example, Mrs. Sallie cannot find rest even after she completes preparing her dinner. After finally finding a seat in her kitchen, she continues to dissect the insufficiencies of her dwelling place:

> Now Mrs. Sallie
> confers her bird-hat to her kitchen table,
> and sees her kitchen. It is bad, is bad,
> her eyes say, and My soft antagonist,
> her eyes say, and My headlong tax and mote,
> her eyes say, and My maniac default,
> my least light.
> "But all my lights are little!"
> Her denunciation
> slaps savagely not only this sick kitchen but
> her Lord's annulment of the main event. (410)

The consequential description of her ghetto dwelling along the lines of ailment and disorder figures Mrs. Sallie's home as working against her. Like the "sick…stair," the "cruel" stove, and the "last sourings" of food she brought home, her entire kitchen "is bad, is bad" and also "sick." Even though they are depicted as things one would not want to touch or use for fear of

contracting an illness, these are things Mrs. Sallie must use; they are part of her dailiness. Despite the kitchen being a small "mote" of a place, it is nonetheless very taxing—or stressful—on her. And though it seemingly causes her bouts of mania, the kitchen is what she must "default" to in order to provide dinner—"the main event"—for her family that is seen as an annulment of a real meal. Repeatedly, she considers her kitchen as if it is behaving, slapping "savagely" at it. Mrs. Sallie's kitchen is, in fact, so inadequate that she cannot even manage to say so with her mouth; as the speaker dictates, "her eyes" relay the atrocity that is her home. She is using the same eyes that are "unrinsed" from working in the home of upper class whites to judge her own space in a lower class environment (407). The attention that Mrs. Sallie's kitchen mentally occupies makes it a significant source of concern for her; she is not satisfied with it. Yet, her perseverance to overcome her immediate surroundings that challenge the completion of her daily activities demonstrates that Mrs. Sallie is someone who does not easily resign to defeat as Moynihan would suggest.

Similar to Wright's work, in "In the Mecca" the kitchenette represents the ghettoscape that is working against Mrs. Sallie as it is portrayed through what it lacks. But unlike Wright, Brooks demonstrates how her protagonist overcomes the challenges of the kitchen itself by remaining resourceful. In the first place, the kitchen is barely a kitchen at all; because the Mecca Flats were made into smaller kitchenettes once blacks assumed occupancy, Mrs. Sallie's apartment is a cramped space that is mostly composed of a small kitchen and living space. In Mrs. Sallie's assessment of the kitchen, the speaker says, "Her denunciation/ slaps savagely not only on this sick kitchen but/ her Lord's annulment of the main event" (410). The kitchen stops short of becoming a full space exclusive to other rooms, leaving the kitchen to seemingly comprise the entirety of Mrs. Sallie's living space. The kitchen, in this this respect, is the only

significant portion of her apartment—to be seated there is to be in view of the entirety of her home. Mrs. Sallie longs to redress her home's charm by decorating but immediately asks, "But what is that? A/ pomade atop a sewage. An offense./ First comes correctness, *then* embellishment!" (410). The kitchen is likened to an error of sorts; there is nothing right about it in the eyes of its beholder. In comparing it to a sewer or trash, Mrs. Sallie associates her uncomfortable kitchenette with the harshness of outside that cannot be made to look pleasant by the slickness that pomade promises. This view of the kitchenette insinuates that Mrs. Sallie's apartment is unsafe; it may as well be a part of the street because it houses the same dangers. These dangers must be eliminated from her home before she can add "embellishment." As her "soft antagonist," the entire apartment, then, works against Mrs. Sallie's goal of maintaining a suitable living space. Even so, the softness of it indicates that the challenges it poses do not deter Mrs. Sallie, for she still manages to make her home as suitable as possible for her family and use the kitchen for the purpose of feeding her family. Moreover, she sees potential where the mere eye sees insufficiency and ugliness.

While newspapers depicted the Mecca as an unattractive slum, Brooks's poem indicates that ghetto dwellers put extreme care into their individual homes, which is often unaccounted for and unnoticed entirely in representations of ghetto life. The viewpoints of the outsider and the protagonist differ in terms of what is under inspection: while the outsider sees everything from the building to the food as sickly, Mrs. Sallie only recognizes her own dwelling as such. She is less concerned with how the building and her surroundings appear and is instead more bothered by how her own immediate space meets the eye because it is the one thing that she can alter herself to look more pleasant. In response to the criticisms about welfare recipients and the rhetoric of black poverty within national discourse, Brooks uses the two converging gazes of her

readers (the outsiders) and Mrs. Sallie (the insider) to magnify that the black urban poor are not always content with remaining in a cycle of poverty as media sources would suggest.

The most telling feature of Brooks's engagement with the sociopolitical welfare of lower class black mothers in "In the Mecca" is how she strategically introduces information about her protagonist. Readers first learn about Mrs. Sallie's line of work, how she eats, where she lives, and finally how many children she has. Though it is mentioned earlier in the poem that she has children, it is not until later—once readers are acquainted with Mrs. Sallie's persevering work ethic—that the speaker mentions that there are nine of them. Brooks reveals delays offering Mrs. Sallie's domestic profile in layers to disrupt how black women are socially read. By only introducing Mrs. Sallie at the beginning of the poem and waiting to incorporate her children into the narrative, Brooks allows her protagonist to be viewed as a person on her own terms instead of by the number of offspring she has. As the Moynihan Report perpetuates the myth that single black mothers disrupt the social order, Brooks does not give her readers a chance to script Mrs. Sallie as a stereotypical matriarch or welfare mother. This order of revelation indicates that Mrs. Sallie cannot "set severity apart" as she wishes because she is constantly being judged and unfairly perceived in national discourse based on her socioeconomic status and where she lives. The number of children she has is last to be mentioned because it represents the starkest offense to civil order and policy formation. Similar to the way in which Mrs. Sallie's potential husband goes seemingly unnoticed, when Mrs. Sallie's children are finally mentioned, they essentially blend into the fold of activity taking place inside and outside of her apartment. However, unlike her potential husband, Mrs. Sallie does not lose sight of her children and notices upon first count that Pepita, the smallest of the lot, is nowhere to be found.

When Mrs. Sallie's children are finally inserted into the narrative, like her living space, they are also characterized by what they lack. Her children disdain surplus material possessions as a defense mechanism to cope with the damaging effects of capitalism and the wealth that their poverty denies them:

> Melodie Mary hates everything pretty and plump.
> And Melodie, Cap and Casey
> and Thomas Earl, Tennessee, Emmett and Briggs
> hate sewn suburbs;
> hate everything combed and strong; hate people who
> have balls, dolls, mittens and dimity frocks and trains
> and boxing gloves, picture books, bonnets for Easter.
> Lace handkerchief owners are enemies of Smithkind. (411-412)

As a way of coping with the fact that they cannot afford much outside of necessities, Mrs. Sallie's children take to disliking the things to which they don't have financial access. These things range from the materialistic to the residential—they don't concern themselves with toys, certain clothing, or life in the suburbs. As they reside in the city, the children conceptualize the suburbs as a formulated way of life that is calculated in a uniform fashion—there is a certain order to life there that contrasts with the unpredictability of the children's urban ghettoscape. While these possessions and ways of life are seemingly a part of the everyday for some, they represent a higher class status than these nine children are able to claim for themselves. It is possible that Mrs. Sallie's children are envious of what they cannot have, but it is easier for them to dislike what they cannot afford because doing so convinces them that they don't want the desirables even if they could have them.

Brooks redirects attention from Moynihan's notion that the black matriarch poses a threat to her children to demonstrate how the ghettoscape itself works against young people's dreams of escaping its boundaries. The children's aforesaid hate of the suburbs is countered by the volatile ghettoscape to which they belong. Like Mrs. Sallie's kitchen, the outdoor environment that they are supposed to enjoy as physically active children contradicts their contentment. This is seen through one of Mrs. Sallie's sons, Thomas Earl, who loves Johnny Appleseed. Though he longs to be Johnny Appleseed, he cannot because

> The ground shudders.
>
> The ground springs up;
>
> Hits you with gnarls and rust,
>
> Derangement and fever, or blare and clerical treasons. (414)

This section of the poem is the first in which the environment comes in direct violent contact with residents. Here, the materiality of the Mecca Flats coincides with the natural environment on which it is located to create a monstrous imagery of defeat. In the same ways that Brooks uses double-meaning adjectives to portray the language of malnutrition and food, she discusses how the outside environment of the ghettoscape also gives way to illness that leads to fever. Moreover, as the urban decline of the Rust Belt is suggested through imagery of metal, nails, rust and devastation, Brooks shows that the physicality of the ghettoscape also affects the psyche of its residents.[13] While Mrs. Sallie attempts to make the most of her "bad" kitchen, Thomas Earl imagines a life beyond the ghetto walls. But, Brooks warns that the ghetto environment can easily hinder Thomas Earl from actualizing his dreams—the "treason" to which she refers.

[13] "Rust" in particular denotes Chicago's inclusion in a group of American cities known for their vast industrial development. These areas would later collectively be named the Rust Belt in the 1980s due to their industrial decline.

In “In the Mecca,” Brooks captures the tension between the ghetto and the civic sector by doing away with social pathology such as that found in the Moynihan Report to show how the state constructs social barriers that are harmful to black communities and black livelihood. As social pathology strives to understand prominent social concerns by locating factors, such as poverty or crime, that increase social disorganization, Moynihan asserts that “at the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure” (30). Though he admits that whites play an important role in his concerns about impoverished “broken” black families, he nonetheless offers patriarchy as a remedy rather than examining initiatives that the state could take in reducing cycles of poverty by providing more opportunities for socioeconomic advancement for black families. Brooks writes against Moynihan’s pathology hypotheses because they do not get at the root of structural systems that contribute to the sociopolitical and economic immobility of blacks in the United States. While such structures include racial discrimination within employment and housing, they also pertain to governmental agencies that lack empathy for urban blacks. In “In the Mecca,” the government is represented through the police, who come to the Mecca to help Mrs. Sallie search for her missing daughter. Brooks writes the police in her poem as “The Law,” portraying the extent to which their presence in black neighborhoods is often associated with a contestation against blacks and, more specifically, against black responses to injustice and efforts to regain control of their residential spaces. Media portrayal of 1960s urban uprisings reflected scenes of confrontation between blacks and the police on city streets and other public venues. At this historical moment in particular, it was not uncommon for black and brown people in urban centers to distrust the police. Images of blacks battered at the hands of police and police dogs during protests of the civil rights movement were

constantly in circulation on television, radio, and print media. According to historian Thomas J. Sugrue, the distrust of the police is

> …in part a consequence of the long history of disproportionate white representation on police forces, [and] in part a consequence of deep-rooted memories of the role that police played—both north and south—in reinforcing racial segregation, in brutalizing black suspects, and in thwarting civil rights protests. (535)

Though Sugrue's claim mainly references physical action police use to constrain blacks, Brooks refrains from mentioning this violence in her long poem to draw attention to how the negligence of law enforcement is also a form of violence. As I will explain shortly, police officers come to the Mecca Flats, ask Mrs. Sallie questions, leave, and then return to simply ask other Meccans if they've seen Pepita. Nothing about the presence of the police conveys an aspect of concern with the welfare of the missing child.

Race becomes an explicit focal point of introspection within the narrative only after the police are invoked. Brooks's concern with social pathology and sociological study of urban black life is seen in the way black Meccans become objects of inspection once police enter their residential space. Per Sugrue's claim, the speaker of the poem remains skeptical about the help law enforcement will contribute even before it arrives. The speaker asks, "How shall the Law enchief the chapters of/ wee brown-black chime, wee brown-black chastity?" (420). This first mention of race is meant to mark racial difference; the police are representative of larger forms of sociopolitical control in much the same ways that welfare is represented within food and malnutrition. Again, Brooks maintains that the black underclass suffers from such structural oppression. The purposeful attention directed to race difference in this instance indicates that

Mrs. Sallie, as a black woman, will not be taken seriously by the police. The search for her missing child is not a priority to law enforcement because her family is not seen as valuable in the eyes of the law. Where before Brooks wrote about littleness ("all my lights are little!"), she manipulates her language here to suggest that the police are using "wee" to mock residents of the Mecca Flats, whose concerns they disregard. Their mocking gesture also refers to the little girl at the center of the search. Moreover, in invoking Pepita's chastity, Brooks underscores the state's historical preoccupation with monitoring black reproduction. For "The Law," Pepita's disappearance signifies that she is simply another black child the state does not have to concern itself with.

While Brooks expounds on larger themes of racial and spatial violence inflicted on the black underclass, her work here points to how scholarly detachment from the personhood of ghetto residents negatively influences the black urban poor's rights to civil protection. The interpersonal energy between Meccans diminishes once the police enter with a certain authority. While the neighbors are familiar and personable with each other, Brooks indicates that they are nonetheless seen and treated as less than worthy of civil protection and defense by governmental affiliations. The police are called to the Mecca Flats when a search by Mrs. Sallie and her children yields no progress on finding Pepita, but they bring no significant order or relief to the case of the missing young girl. If anything, Brooks figures the police as unhelpful agents who perform the same job of searching as Mrs. Sallie and her children had done before they arrived, instead of a thorough search that is expected of professionals with their criminal justice and investigative training. Rather than using the questions they ask to assess the situation and begin their search, the text tells us that "the Law leaves, with likeness of a 'southern' belle" (421). The questions that police ask are so insignificant that the speaker does not even cite them. Readers

can assume that because the police leave Mecca Flats in the fashion of a Southern belle, the officers are too concerned with how the environment appears than with the emergency that they were called to assist in. In a mocking gesture, Brooks likens the police to the image of the Southern belle to get at how governmental aid is often judgmental towards the racial minorities in need rather than helpful. Brooks symbolizes the racial and class dynamics at play in likening the police to a Southern belle, who is traditionally a white young woman from an upper socioeconomic background. The privileged presentation of the police contrasts starkly with "wee brown-black chastity." Influenced by the images of black poverty portrayed in the media and believing the misrepresentation of black life within sociological discourse, government agencies are persuaded that ghetto dwellers are not worthy of the civil protection to which they are lawfully entitled.

As victims of pathology-centered sociological study, black working class mothers and children are especially hindered by the state's disenfranchisement of black residential areas and its denial of civic resources such as welfare. The police use the racial demographics of the Mecca Flats to determine how to interact with Mrs. Sallie and how to go about handling the case of the missing child. Upon arrival to the apartment building, the police immediately take stock of Mrs. Sallie and her family. According to the narrator, "The Law arrives—and does not quickly go/ to fetch a female of the Negro Race" (420-421). Instead of being identified as a child, Pepita simply becomes a victim of her gender and race; the immediacy of the juvenile's case is overlooked. In stripping Pepita of her juvenile status in this way, Brooks demonstrates how black children become seen as adults in the eyes of the law and law enforcement simply because of their race. Working class children of color are thus not cared for or protected by the law in manner in which children should be. In this light, Brooks's poem shows how welfare reform left to depend on the

academic sources and media representation will result in harm done to black communities and black children, in particular. As a segment of "The Law," this brand of welfare would enact the same type of discrimination it did when initially conceived in the New Deal, though Brooks shows that this time the discrimination would be justified by Moynihan's inadequate, damaging research.

Like many writers in the twentieth century, Brooks considers the ghettoscape of working class black areas like the Mecca Flats to be a complex system of survival for its residents and a complex maze of confusion for those unfamiliar with ghetto life. With the presence of the Law in the Mecca Flats, Brooks expounds on the ways in which the black underclass interacts with systems of political power—a privilege to which ghetto dwellers know they do not have access. As such, Brooks's poor and working class black characters are keenly aware of the sociopolitical boundaries that perpetuate their low-income socioeconomic status. In a direct address to the police, the speaker says, "Sheriffs,/ South State Street is a Postulate!/ Until you look" (421). Contrasted with the sure and "sewn suburbs," the ghettoscape of South State Street is merely assumed or hypothesized about. The speaker's insistence that the police "look" relays a double meaning of searching for Pepita but also of simply looking at the ghetto with empathy and compassion rather than judgement and dismissal. Brooks centralizes the vulnerability of her characters and the social knowledge they have in knowing how they are seen by those in power in a plea to be recognized as people who are entitled to civil liberties. Contrary to the belief that black ghetto dwellers remain ignorant to the ways of law enforcement and the formation and function of policy, Mrs. Sallie and her neighbors know all too well that they are not considered a priority by officers of the law. They also recognize this as a fundamental problem that their social, economic, and political position does not allow them to easily and successfully confront.

In the end, “In the Mecca” is a call for empathy. Brooks uses Mrs. Sallie’s particular situation as a plea for the ghetto to not be seen as an all-encompassing holding cell of poverty and vice, but as a marginal space of people who are victims of sociopolitical disenfranchisement. By diverting attention from Mrs. Sallie and turning to her children and the search for Pepita later in the poem, Brooks implicitly critiques Moynihan’s claims that single black women are not suitable to raise children without the presence of a male figure by instead focusing on the lack of social services that can aid in her family’s wellbeing. The children feature prominently here because Brooks considers them to be the most affected by welfare reform and the misrepresentation of unmarried, working class black women. Driving Brooks’s point home via the young characters in the poem, the speaker says:

> Until you look. You look—and you discover
> the paper dolls are terrible. You touch.
> You look and touch.
> The paper dolls are terrible and cold. (421)

Brooks likens black children to paper dolls in order to demonstrate a sense of fragility not often afforded to black youth. In doing so, she counters the ways in which black children are seen as troublemakers, problems to societal order, or “gangs of juvenile hoodlums,” as the *Chicago Daily Tribune* indicated (1950). She also counters the myth that single black mothers are dangers to their families. In “In the Mecca,” Mrs. Sallie goes through great strides to ensure that her children are safe and well provided for in ways that the police do not, despite it being their job to protect and serve. In using the one-dimensional paper doll as a metaphor for impoverished youth, Brooks suggests that it is impossible to know the emotional welfare of someone just by appearances alone.

Brooks calls for law officials and policy makers to realize that black children are able to be shaped and manipulated by their surroundings, direction from authority figures, and how they are treated by those in power in the same ways that Moynihan dictates they will be mentally underdeveloped in a single-parent household. Though Mrs. Sallie's children are well provided for in the life their mother is able to make for them, Brooks insists that they are nonetheless "terrible and cold." On the surface, these two descriptors denote how police see black children as mischievous and disrespectful. Nevertheless, Brooks uses them to indicate that these children *feel* "terrible and cold." These adjectives also foreshadow Pepita's dead body that readers learn is still undiscovered and lies under the bed of a male neighbor who has murdered her. Through Pepita's death, Brooks suggests that patriarchy is not a sure solution for socioeconomic stability. As impoverished black children are cast off by the police and the government as unworthy of civil protection and welfare benefits, Brooks is concerned that they bear the greatest toll for society's dismissal and disdain of the black ghetto. The emphasis on the need for the paper dolls to be touched reflects the emotional connection that is needed not only from their black mothers—as Moynihan assumes—but also governmental institutions that have the resources to make a difference in what black ghetto areas lack.

Conclusion

When we consider "In the Mecca" as a text that is concerned with the urban crisis, we are able to locate Brooks's sociopolitical engagement as a writer who often did not align herself with a socially-conscious approach. My analysis of Brooks's poem demonstrates that it challenges negative images of poverty and public housing that are associated with blacks by expounding on the lack of governmental resources within black residential areas. Secondly, "In the Mecca"

points to how the government takes part in instilling blacks within a system of poverty through racialized welfare tactics. By reading "In the Mecca" as a critique of welfare reform discourse, I focus on Brooks's work as a testimony to the challenges black women faced in the urban crisis in particular that are rarely accounted for in historical analyses. In this way, the poem works to undo the historical damage writ large over the experience of single, impoverished black women by disproving stereotypes which indicate that they are unworthy of the civic support offered to white women.

Gwendolyn Brooks's work remains important for considerations of black ghetto life because it highlights the hardships that single mothers experienced historically within governmental policies. The tragedy of a young child's death in "In the Mecca" discloses the dangers of underfunding and not supporting black residential areas and victimizing black mothers within political discourse that influences policy and social change. Such systems, including rudimentary and informal real estate practices that barred blacks from living in certain areas and the quotidian social practices of perpetuating stereotypes about black working class women, are hazardous. In *In the Mecca*, Brooks uncovers how black women were depicted as offences to 1960s public housing and welfare reform discourse. In so far as this poem is meant to bring to light the voices of black Meccans who have been written out of historical narratives, it also interrogates how the experiences of black women, especially those of low socioeconomic status, have been overlooked and under-attended to both inside and outside of their communities. In having Mrs. Sallie as the searcher and Pepita as the one being searched for, "In the Mecca" demonstrates that black women suffer the most from the lack of civil regard for black humanity and welfare. It also shows that often only other black women recognize their oppression in this way. Brooks's poem thus disrupts national discourse concerning black impoverished women as

dangers to society by instead focusing on the manner in which they themselves are victims of sociopolitical protocols that thrive on their failure to overcome poverty.

Chapter Three:
Donald Goines and the Post-Uprising Ghetto

In what is known as the largest incident of civil unrest in the twentieth century, the 1967 Detroit uprisings occurred in "the Motor City" soon after it was named the "Model City" for avoiding a civil disturbance only a few years before. In July 1967, a police raid on a "blind pig," or an illegal afterhours bar, in a black residential area sparked one of the most aggressive upheavals in national history. When the matter subsided, forty-three people lay dead—thirty-three blacks and ten whites. More than one thousand were injured, three thousand and forty-eight were arrested, more than five thousand were left homeless, and more than one thousand buildings were burned down (Darden and Thomas 1). Joe T. Darden and Richard W. Thomas note that after the uprising, white policemen began to fear blacks even more upon witnessing the power of black unrest.[14] Whites experienced the uprising as such a disturbance to social order that they began joining the National Rifle Association in large numbers to prepare for the next violent uproar. Citizens purchased guns in record numbers, to the extent that housewives were seen on television practicing shooting handguns (Darden and Thomas 7).

As Detroit took center stage in the media, the rest of the country watched as the city festered in fumes from arms and fire. The 4 August 1967 cover of *Life* shows the silhouette of

[14] I use the term "uprising" throughout to reflect how differently Detroiters saw the events of July 1967. Some people refer to the incident as a protest while other refer to it as a rebellion. For the sake of the argument that I'm making in this chapter, my terminology draws attention to the multiple offenses against black Detroiters that fueled the disturbance much earlier than the raid on the blind pig. My hope is that by rather than conceiving of the incident as an isolated frustration that occurred sporadically, referring to it as a civil uprising invokes the local microaggressions that were happening between black residents and state representatives such as the police that accrued over a long span of time.

two soldiers dressed in hardhats and brandishing rifles in the foreground of a fiery blaze. The magazine's only headline reads: "Negro Revolt: The Flames Spread." In what looks like the scene of a war fought abroad, the cover image depicts an actual snapshot of armed troops roaming the streets of Detroit. Other photographs inside the magazine show civilian interactions with police, people standing on guard and in defense on street corners and inside buildings, and army tanks that were called in to assist. In nearly all of these photographs, guns testify to the violent nature of the six-day affair. Included in that same issue is reportage on a Black Power summit held in Newark the same month of the Detroit uprisings. Among those attending the summit were activists H. Rap Brown, Ron Karenga, Floyd McKissick, and, most notably, Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones). The summit, which banned whites from attending, called for black-controlled financial institutions and paramilitary training for black youths, and summoned blacks to boycott all international sporting events such as the Olympics and to refuse to fight in the Vietnam War. One photo shows Baraka speaking to a crowd with a bandage on his head from a police-inflicted wound. He describes the recent uprisings in Newark as "a rebellion of black people for self-determination" ("Detroit" 26). In another photo, Rap Brown is escorted to court in handcuffs for charges of inciting a riot and arson in Cambridge, Maryland. In this rather thin magazine, the essence of black cultural production and urban life in the 1960s was captured succinctly: in bringing together the brashness of both black nationalist ideology and black protest, *Life* reflected the sentiment that black unrest had finally procured national attention as more than just one singular incident. Though this unrest was largely misread or disregarded as a serious political movement by legal officials, the 1960s was a moment in which a collective black consciousness went head-to-head with the systems of oppression that had provoked it.

Black protest and black consciousness lived on even beyond the fumes from the uprisings as cultural producers expounded on institutional injustices against blacks related to housing and space in the Blacks Arts Movement (BAM) and in street literature. This exploration of space within art was directly related to the way in which black civil unrest remained unheard by the police, city officials, and the federal government despite the physical ruins left as evidence of black oppression. Though the frequency of civil unrest in the 1960s had diminished by the 1970s, black Americans were still grappling with their effects in the next decade. All forms of media featured black streets as they were erupting with restlessness. More than the imagery of protests and police confrontation during the Civil Rights Movement, these civil responses displayed the brutal outrage of citizens who refused to remain silent and passive in the face of blatant harassment and systematic racial discrimination. Figures such as Amiri Baraka contributed to these vibrant protest energies by participating on the street and by producing art that critically engaged the issues at hand. Many of these artists were working under the influence of BAM, which began in the wake of Malcolm X's assassination in 1965. Aligning BAM with the Black Power Movement, Larry Neal asserted in 1968 that "the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology" (55). This call for a radical change that centered the needs, history, and culture of black people is invoked by the "revolutionary" within their works and within their approaches to sociopolitical change. The artists and thinkers from this era wanted to disturb the very American culture that oppressed black expression. Works responding to or representing this historical moment of the 1960s often portrayed black urban space, the ghetto in particular, through the ways in which socioeconomic disenfranchisement, police brutality, and other racist systemic injustices and practices hindered black upward mobility and thwarted the

psychological development of black youth. These works included the more literary and experimental work of BAM that continues to garner critical attention and merit, and the street literature that was influenced by popular culture and marketed to the working class. Described as "[a] mixture of utopian fantasy and urban realism," contemporary street literature (also called street lit, urban fiction, or crime fiction) uncovers many of the consequential effects of racial segregation and the constructing of ghettos before and during the urban crisis (Gifford 9). In presenting tales of pimps, prostitutes, hustlers, drug pushers, thieves, and other criminals, these novels represent the deindustrialization of American cities after World War II and the ensuing problems caused by systematic injustices of retaining blacks within cycles of poverty. Writers of street literature usually employ the vernacular that is true to the street in detailing the struggles of the urban poor as they navigate problems that arise in the gritty urban landscape.

After events such as the Detroit uprising, writers began to depict the black urban experience through what I call post-uprising literature—creative work which was born out of the protest energies of the 1960s. As cultural productions that appear in the aftermath of civil responses to the surveillance of black space, post-uprising literature tends to focus on the ways in which black mobility—social, economic, cultural, political, physical—is hindered by spatial quarantine resulting from racial discrimination and segregation. In this way, the ghetto tends to be implied in post-uprising literature because it remains the site where blacks have been systematically retained within urban centers by denying racial minorities access to better housing, employment, and education. One major characteristic of post-uprising literature is its call for social change within and/or for black residential space through a revolutionary aesthetic. Given that activists within 1960s social movements were also expressing their views in art, many of these works were meant to garner traction for sociopolitical change. Like protest literature**,**

post-uprising literature often intends to make readers more aware of a social issue, but at its core it is more interested in demonstrating the sociopolitical root causes of black oppression during the urban crisis.

In this chapter, I engage Donald Goines's Kenyatta series as a seminal work of post-uprising literature for its critical attention to black residential space, black activism, and the systems of oppression that perpetuate black poverty during the urban crisis. In *Crime Partners* (*CP*, 1974), *Death List* (*DL*, 1974), *Kenyatta's Escape* (*KE*, 1974), and *Kenyatta's Last Hit* (*KLH*, 1974), Goines crafts a ghetto epic in which the stakes are not only high for the protagonist, but for the entire black community from which he hails. The narrative follows Kenyatta, a black ghetto revolutionary, and his unnamed organization of followers as they attempt to rid the ghetto of a racist police force, drug pushers who enable addiction, and prostitution. Violence is the main force of Kenyatta's resistance, and he uses the gun without a second thought about anyone who opposes his goals. While the pimps and prostitutes are frightened enough to leave the ghetto, the police are not as steadfast, and many white police officers fall victim to Kenyatta's wrath. Described as a militant organization, Kenyatta's crew is being tracked by a pair of detectives who are searching for those responsible for the recent killings. The final scene takes readers to a Las Vegas penthouse where the main supplier of drugs delivered to the ghetto—a white man—lives, thousands of miles from the Detroit ghettoscape. As street lit, Goines's novels generally depict black urban life from the perspective of the working class ghetto. While it is a departure from Goines's earlier works that center the pimps, prostitutes, and drug pushers that Kenyatta is after, the Kenyatta series fits comfortably into the author's grim representation of the ghetto as displayed throughout his many titles.

As post-uprising literature, Goines's representations of black urban space are reflective of the moment in which the ghetto was envisioned by cultural producers as defending itself. The civil uprisings of the 1960s inspired black artists to present black communities that were invested in fighting for their rights in confrontational methods rather than through peaceful protests and demonstrations. Goines's work shows how ghetto dwellers were attempting to regain control of their space through these uncompromising efforts. As such, I posit that the Kenyatta series is informed by Goines's knowledge of Detroit's activism and the city's changing race relations in the wake of the 1967 civil disturbance. As a direct response to that historical remembrance, the series highlights the heavy blame that Goines put on police involvement, representatives of the state with whom residents are often in conflict. Furthermore, his knowledge of the ideas stemming from resistance efforts in Detroit—most notably Malcolm X—also allowed him to imagine Kenyatta's motive as part of a larger tradition of black diasporic movement building. Finally, Goines includes an interracial detective duo within his epic as a way to chart Detroit's altering race relations in the post-uprising moment. As my analysis localizes the series to the city specifically, I demonstrate how the black detective, Benson, is reflective of the growing number of blacks who joined the Detroit Police Department in the aftermath of the uprising, as officials began to note that the friction between the police and the black community was occurring because of the low number of black officers in the city. I also point out how Goines uses Benson to highlight the institutional and social discrimination that even upwardly mobile blacks who lived outside of the ghetto faced.

By centering Goines's Kenyatta series within Detroit's history of activism and race relations, I further the critical trajectory that has heretofore discussed the series in terms of national resistance efforts. I localize Goines in order to bring his street lit back to the literal

streets of Detroit that motivated the author's charged representations of black urban life and his critiques of oppressive systems that hinder the black underclass. The scholarship concerning the Kenyatta series concentrates on the protagonist's subjectivity as a revolutionary figure, makes sense of the violence that is inflicted within the novels as a means of bringing about black liberation, and/or focuses on Goines's representation of Kenyatta's organization as a critique of the Black Panther Party (BPP). While I agree that the series is ultimately critical of the BPP—as Goines mentions this specifically within the narrative—I also find it important to locate Kenyatta's motives within Detroit's own history of revolutionary thinking and activism before and after 1967. As post-uprising literature, the series considers the changing black urban landscape in the aftermath of uprisings that happened in several major American cities throughout the 1960s.

In the way in which Goines's novels were intentionally marketed to the black working class as entertainment, these four novels are also works of literary activism and community engagement because of their heavy sociopolitical critique and calls to action, attributes that scholars have yet to fully unpack in consideration of Goines's work. In his analysis of black pulp publishing, Justin Gifford contends that "Goines attempted to move black experience literature beyond the narrow boundaries of the [black crime fiction] genre that he himself had helped to erect…in order to create a mode of social critique that also doubled as popular entertainment for black readers" (70). Building on Gifford's claim, my analysis of Goines's work stresses that critique differs from activism in that the latter provides a call to action; it demands a palpable effort to create positive change. Bonnie Rhee Andryeyev provides the most astute assessment of Goines's engagement with community by maintaining that he creates a mode of ghetto knowledge production. She states that Goines "presented narratives that not only exposed the

city as no longer white but also characterized ghetto knowledge as an urban epistemology inaccessible to whites" (22). While Andryeyev focuses on Goines's earlier works, my focus on the Kenyatta series—the last of his published material—illuminates how Goines derails linear depictions of vice as celebratory by indicating how drugs, prostitution, and the police are specifically harmful to black communities. Moreover, the plot of the series is but one extended quest to trace the trafficking of drugs into the ghetto back to a wealthy white supplier. Candace Love Jackson comes the closest to positioning Goines within Detroit's history of grassroots activism, but she eventually falls short in expanding on the way in which this history relates to Kenyatta's approach to black liberation. Instead, Jackson argues that Kenyatta's mission to rid the ghetto of racist police is a reaction to the BPP's call for an end to police brutality. She succinctly draws attention to the parallels that Goines could have made to other figures in Detroit such as James and Grace Lee Boggs and their involvement in labor and civil rights across intersectional identities of race, gender, and class. Though she mentions the Detroit race riot of 1943, she does not take into account Goines's first-hand knowledge of the 1967 uprising and the black community's testimonies that cited the police as the inciters of that incident. As I will demonstrate, although he was incarcerated at the moment in which the uprisings occurred, Goines was nonetheless informed of the events that were playing out and how they lived on in black Detroit's historical memory. The Kenyatta series is Goines's rendering of that memory and the impact that it had on black consciousness in Detroit.

The entirety of Goines's Kenyatta series is a confrontation with the ghettoscape. Goines characterizes his protagonist as defensive, knowledgeable about diasporic liberation ideology, and well-informed of the systematic influences that perpetuate black immobility. Kenyatta's whole project is to spread awareness of the ways in which American politics don't function to

benefit the black underclass. Therefore, he himself must work to overturn the devastation wreaked by civic disregard of African Americans. Kenyatta uses his knowledge both to protect the ghetto and to move beyond it in order to secure further resources and protection. In this way, Goines's work shows that the ghetto was such a fixity in both black urban life and the American imaginary that black cultural producers in the post-uprising moment were imagining beyond ghetto walls but also still engaging with black spaces like the ghetto as spaces that could also be useful in garnering sociopolitical power for the black underclass. In Goines's work from the 1970s, only those residents who are knowledgeable about systemic injustice and willing to sacrifice for black liberation are able to move beyond the ghettoscape. They realize that this is necessary to bring about change and agency to ghetto dwellers.

Donald Goines remains a historical hallmark within the world of street literature for the popularity that his novels garnered, but also for the social critique that they offer to his working class readership. As the author of sixteen novels between 1970 and 1975, Goines recounted the grim details of ghetto life as he experienced them himself. While he was raised in a middle-class family, Goines eventually retreated to working class neighborhoods after his discharge from the Airforce and after acquiring an addiction to heroin. He would fight this addiction for the rest of his life, but it would also greatly inform the need for him to testify about the sociopolitical ramifications of systemic racism that fueled issues such as drug addiction, poor housing conditions, the prison industrial complex, and police brutality that affected working-class blacks at alarming rates. His tales of pimps, prostitutes, drug dealers, and crime have greatly influenced not only the street lit genre, but the world of hip hop and other writers of detective fiction. Moreover, in that he is a Detroiter who experienced the city's uprisings in 1943 and 1967, Goines's oeuvre undoubtedly documents the changing cityscape along the lines of race,

infrastructure, and politics as the city slowly morphed from prosperity to economic decline. His literary representations of the insular ghetto reflect all of these areas through the vantage point of the oppressed, with content that speaks to the everyday in a way that is most iconic among street lit writers in the post-World War II period urban crisis.

As Goines's most extensive project, the Kenyatta Series represents the epitome of his intellectual engagement with black residential space. In this chapter, I describe how Goines imagines the ghetto as a space that should be defended and reclaimed by its residents. In writing the ghettoscape through the lens of the revolutionary, Goines directs readers to the ability of marginalized communities to exert self-control over their space. In reading the series as post-uprising literature, I consider the ways in which Goines's firsthand knowledge of Detroit's 1967 civil unrest inspired the social criticism grounded within his literary output. I argue that these four novels demonstrate how Goines's writing of working class Detroit is indicative of the way in which the ghetto became a fixity within American society and culture. By identifying the ghetto as in need of revolutionary social change for his protagonist, Goines connects the struggle for ghetto liberation to larger forms of resistance within the African diaspora. As such, he envisions the fight to regain control of black residential space as a matter of human and civil rights. Furthermore, by imagining space as a raced concept, Goines explores the contours of race relations and state-mandated, systemic racism through his critique of the police in post-uprising Detroit.

Goines, a self-made writer who perfected his craft by reading other writers, paired the knowledge he learned working on the streets with his experience in the criminal justice system to enhance his fiction with critical insight about black oppression and socioeconomic disenfranchisement. His novels take place within the inner-city of Detroit and other major

American cities and usually consist of narratives about the lives of pimps, bootleggers, gangsters, prostitutes, thieves, drug addicts, and drug dealers—activities and professions in which he himself engaged at several points in his life. Like his characters, Goines was arrested and jailed several times for criminal activity. But contrary to the lives his characters were born into, Goines was comfortably reared in Detroit's middle class though he loathed the restraints placed on him by his father. He eventually went against his father's wishes for him to take over the family's dry cleaning business and enlisted in the Airforce as a means to travel and to gain independence. It was while in the military that he was introduced to heroin—the vice that would control him for the rest of his life. He began his writing career while serving a prison sentence in Jackson State Prison in Michigan. In 1965, he first tried his hand at writing Westerns but found no success in doing so. Landing in the same prison again five years later, Goines found the work of Iceberg Slim (the pseudonym of Robert Beck), who found success writing novels and memoirs about his life as a pimp. As he had also worked as a pimp in Detroit, Goines was attracted to Iceberg Slim's work and decided to try writing a similar novel based on his own experiences. He completed this novel within four weeks. When he circulated the manuscript among his fellow inmates, they suggested that he send it to Holloway House, the same company that published Iceberg Slim. Holloway's response arrived four weeks later, with the publisher expressing an interest in Goines's work and encouraging him to continue writing. Within four weeks, Goines sent Holloway another book, *Dopefiend* (1971), which became his first published book. Not too long after, Holloway sent *Whoreson* (1972), the first book Goines sent, to the market (Goode 42).

Goines's writing is most aligned with the Black Arts Movement and the blaxploitation aesthetic of the 1970s. His writing career began in a period in African American literary history

in which black aesthetics were beginning to be disentangled from the literary traditions of white America within popular discourse. The Harlem Renaissance and the Chicago Renaissance marked significant increases in black literary output. Much of this writing was produced by black writers who began a literary tradition of their own to make a statement that black cultural production was influential, widespread, various, substantial, and important. In the aftermath of these renaissances and the period after, what Lawrence Jackson called the Indignant Generation (1934-1960), black writers began to consciously theorize their own literary and aesthetic traditions with the onset of the BAM and the flourishing canon of black feminist writing of the 1960s and 1970s. Though black writing has always been innovative and hasn't always ascribed to white standards, BAM encouraged and pushed for black writing to abide by its own aesthetic by existing within the intersection of revolutionary thinking and experimentalism. This approach proved to be more aligned with street lit writers, though they are not readily included within such a tradition.

The Kenyatta series is typical of Goines's work that explores notions of blackness in 1960s and 1970s popular culture. Most notably, Goines employs the blaxploitation film aesthetic in such a way that challenges twentieth century social scientists' depiction of the ghetto as an object of pathologic inquiry. This genre of film made popular during the early 1970s usually portrayed black characters who are socially or politically conscious ghetto superstars amidst a dilemma within an urban setting. While most of the characters are usually black, these films often feature white villains who are defeated by black justice. As Novotny Lawrence relates, "[I]t is important to understand that the conflict operates as a metaphor in which whites represent the oppressive establishment. Hence, their defeat at the hands of an African American protagonist is symbolic of blacks overcoming the racism perpetuated by the machine" (19). Such films—

including *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), *The Final Countdown* (1972), *Coffy* (1973), and *Foxy Brown* (1974)—usually erect African American principle characters who embody what Mikel J. Koven calls a "baadasssss" persona. Although this characterization suggests intimidation, Koven asserts that these characters may not always maintain a tough attitude, "but they are all literally 'outlaws' – beyond, or outside of, the law. They work in those liminal spaces between the law, between illegality and vice on the one side and harmless decadence and pleasure seeking on the other" (17). Depicted in this light, Kenyatta is a tall black man with a bald head, a mustache, and a heavy beard. When he first appears, he is wearing a white t-shirt and a pair of Levi jeans. As a rather complex character, Kenyatta is a tough leader, but also a compassionate and caring friend and lover. He is able to be violent and maintain strict control over the operations of his organization, while in other moments he expresses his innermost emotions with Betty, his girlfriend.

Exuding major control over his organization with a hint of calm, Kenyatta is the quintessential brand of masculinity in the blaxploitation aesthetic. As he explains to two new recruits: "I've got twenty-five men, plus fifteen women who are in our organization, and every one of them is dedicated, so I ain't foolin' myself. My people are trained, and every one of them has one thought in their mind. Kill the honkie. That's our rally cry. Death to Whitey" (*CP* 48). Not only are his words but their intent are deadly and without question the law that he abides by in order to bring about the justice he feels his community is due. Betty, one of his members expresses that Kenyatta's staunch faith is one of the qualities that draws her to his mission:

> She believed in what the man was doing in trying to clean up the ghettos of dope pushers and pimps. No other organization was really doing anything and she could see the results of Kenyatta's work. He had cleaned the streets of whores,

> since the pimps had moved their girls. It had been too much trouble fighting with Kenyatta's dedicated men they were fools, so the pimps thought. But dangerous fools. (*CP* 98)

In addition to his stern leadership, his charisma and proven results are what make his followers believe in him instead of the police. Kenyatta is envisioned by his members as a revolutionary who is on the brink of reaching his goal of helping to create a liberated urban space unlike any other for the black working class.

Nonetheless, even though Goines employs the blaxploitation aesthetic as a means to present Kenyatta as a ghetto hero, his delivery of the genre leaves little room to fully develop his female characters and to provide a critical analysis that also considers the socioeconomic and sociopolitical restrictions black women experienced in the urban crisis. While deciphering Goines's ghetto is important, it is equally crucial to note the shortcomings within his critique that privilege certain black working class experiences over others. Like much of the post-World War II literature concerning the ghetto, the Kenyatta series is about the fight for black patriarchy and black male liberation; it does not consider the ways in which black women were also deeply affected by the surveillance and segregation of black space. In the previous chapter, I argued that Gwendolyn Brooks highlights black women's exclusions from necessary public assistance programs such as welfare that was offered to white women and families in the 1960s and the consequences black families faced because of anti-black policies. Goinesdoes not tackle similar issues in his criticisms of police brutality and the exploitation of blacks within the drug economy. He does not point out the ways in which black women, including those in Kenyatta's organization, are the targets of physical, emotional, sexual, and socioeconomic harm, even more so than black men. Instead, Goines depicts women as sources of safety for men. In various

instances, black women are employed within heists as coverups in getaway cars. Kenyatta uses female physical attractiveness to deter policemen from otherwise suspecting the men of mischief after they complete criminal acts. While women are valuable assets to the organization for this reason, they are never written about and rarely spoken about by other characters as leaders in their own right. Instead, they exist almost as male property—consistently introduced, talked about, and referenced in terms of the man with whom they are romantically attached. Nevertheless, in spite of these problematic gender representations, Goines's work remained a channel by which his working class black readers could be introspective about the social world that perpetuated their marginalization.

"Meanwhile, in the ghetto…"

Like many cities after World War II, Detroit scarcely welcomed its growing black population as citizens with significant contributions. Rather, these newcomers from the South were seen as bothersome and were denied equitable housing and employment as a means to exclude them from the socioeconomic advancement they anticipated in relocating to urban cities. As in Chicago, restrictive covenants kept blacks from buying in many of the white neighborhoods of Detroit, forcing them to live amongst each other in areas that quickly became impoverished and lacked essential resources such as food suppliers, recreational spaces, and civil protection. Even before the notable Ossian Sweet case in the 1920s, blacks who moved into white neighborhoods were pushed to leave through physical and emotional coercion.[15] In 1960,

[15] In September 1925, Dr. Ossian and Gladys Sweet enlisted their family and friends to help them move into a recently purchased bungalow at the intersection of Garland and Charlevoix, an all-white neighborhood. On their second night in the house, the Sweets and nine others were accosted by a mob of white neighbors. When rocks were thrown at the windows, shots fired from the house, killing one and wounding another. The eleven occupants of the house were all arrested and charged with first degree murder and the conspiracy to commit murder. Sweet's defense was based on the psychology of fear and racial prejudice. When the all-white, male jury could not reach a verdict,

the level of segregation between blacks and whites in Detroit was 64.9 percent, and it was even higher in the suburbs at 92.1 percent (Darden 1976 85). As cities erupted across the country in civil responses to injustice, white fear consequently led whites to flee to the outskirts of metropolitan areas. In Detroit alone between 1960 and 1970, 344,000 whites fled from the city as the black population increased by 178,000 (Darden 1976 88). In just a decade, the percentage of blacks in Detroit rose from 28.9 percent to 43.7 percent (Darden 1976 89). In spite of these changes, housing within the city still remained largely racially segregated. In many ways, the rigor with which white residents sought to discourage integrating their neighborhoods was almost as vigorous as attempts to keep blacks on the darker side of town in the South that many black Detroiters had fled in the 1940s.

Although the ghetto that Goines depicts is fictional, the disparity that it relays is by and large indicative of many historical patterns of systemic injustice. The pervasive nature of white flight, racial segregation, and police harassment collectively led to the horrific event that occurred in Detroit in July 1967. In addition to completely being denied the right to live in certain areas, blacks were displaced from their original homes. For instance, the community of Paradise Valley was uprooted, and working class blacks were forced to move into the 12th Street area where the uprising commenced. Meanwhile, whites relocated to the suburbs, in a move that Darden and Thomas note created a wall that kept blacks within the declining city (5). Detroit's ghettos were pushed to house much of the black population, resulting in an increase of poverty and physical marginalization. As much of the space therein became grounds for necessary

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Judge Frank Murray declared a mistrial in the case of *The People v. Sweet* on 27 November 1925. Sweet's brother, Henry Sweet, was again prosecuted and found not guilty on 13 May 1926. The Ossian Sweet House was added to the National Register of Historic Places in April 1985. The trial and re-trail around which it is centered exposed racial tensions in the North following the Great Migration and reinforced the right of blacks to self-defense.

housing, Detroit's black ghetto lost a great amount of its recreational space that was used for children and youth. A large percentage of black children were subsequently reared in areas with increasingly poor conditions that thwarted their mental and social development (Darden and Thomas 6). Such conditions led the way for forms of vice to become readily available to children and thus to overrun black communities already experiencing a deficit in resources. The lack of concern for black citizens and black neighborhoods was already strongly noted by the ghetto. The police raid at the blind pig in July of 1967 only added fuel to a fire that was already lit by the damaging effects of unequal residential and spatial conditions.

The ghetto that Goines depicts in the Kenyatta series is one in which blacks are fighting for their right to roam freely through their residential space without fear of police harassment and socioeconomic exploitation. The war that Kenyatta wages against the police and drug dealers ultimately makes way for the story to take the form of a ghetto epic—the novels take readers from the Midwest to the West Coast and even verge on international travel. As the protagonist plots and moves to various places, Goines writes the ghetto as a holding cell of black potential rather than dejection and restlessness. His narrative leads black urban space to become more than just the backdrop of warfare, but a central locale of critique. As post-uprising fiction, the Kenyatta series is intentionally informed by Goines's experiences with the urban cityscape in the aftermath of Detroit's 1967 uprising, particularly his knowledge of activism and race relations in the city thereafter. Heeding the police brutality occurring before and after that historic event, Goines's scripting of black space is predicated on surveillance by law enforcement. He makes a clear distinction between city life and rural life in the series in order to expound on the social restraints placed on blacks within urban centers. Understanding the ghetto as no longer a stopping place for the upwardly mobile but a permanent predicament for the black underclass,

Goines puts his critique of black residential space and systemic injustice into perspective by invoking other historical instances of black liberation, such as the Algerian War. In what follows, I demonstrate how Goines presents the ghetto as practicing self-defense rather than succumbing to the racial discrimination embedded within policing practices and the socioeconomic exploitation of drug pushers. By connecting this fight to other resistance efforts within the African diaspora, Goines gives power to the black underclass to overcome the boundaries placed on them by systemic injustices.

For Goines, the relationship between space and race is a matter of spatial authority and the right to fair, safe housing. Kenyatta's goal to reclaim black urban space from the hands of police and drug pushers in order for residents to feel protected is thus a matter of urgent liberation. Remaining knowledgeable about discriminatory practices that maintain working class blacks within a cycle of poverty and drug dependency, he knows that the plight of his community will only worsen if he and his comrades fail to act in regaining their residential space. For this reason, Kenyatta believes that everyone in his organization must be deeply invested in revolutionary social change by any means necessary. As he explains to two new recruits early on in *Crime Partners*: "My boys have got to be dedicated. You brothers are dedicated but not to getting rid of these white pigs that ride around our neighborhoods acting like white gods" (*CP* 45). At the onset, Kenyatta is deliberate that his mission is to destabilize the power that the white police force exerts over the black ghetto. Goines marks the importance of spatial control in presenting two main spatial areas: the ghetto and the country**.** The ghetto is presented as a space in which blacks live but face great physical harassment and emotional manipulation from police. Essentially, it is an impoverished area with rampant drug and alcohol abuse, criminal activity, and other vices. Even though there is the broader city of Detroit within

the backdrop of the ghetto, it is a place in which blacks face adversity and have been dejected from full civic participation. In this way, the ghetto comes to represent the city for Goines's black characters for it is the only parts of the urban terrain in which they are allowed to navigate in spite of the fact that it is neither a safe environment nor well-resourced by the state. Conversely, the country is a non-raced territory that Kenyatta's group experiences as a space free from the extenuating white control that they have to encounter within city limits. The city is a place of violence, where the police and other forms of power continuously attempt to manipulate the black psyche by fear, while the country represents the freedom that blacks can enjoy without constantly taking their race into account in social encounters.

Though the ghetto is home to many, its residents have no ownership over their space. In addition to the novels' named characters, Goines also periodically describes a host of ghetto dwellers who are no more than part of the backdrop of his urban epic. These people are so insignificant to the police who are sent to work in their neighborhood that they disappear into the periphery of public concern. Goines characterizes these residents as having little agency to highlight how civic disregard of black space combined with black disenfranchisement can lead to uncontrollable social conditions for ghetto dwellers. In being subjected to restricted mobility enabled by a fear of police and other dangers, they calculate their moves, which are few and far between. Goines intentionally points out when these residents are witness to the atrocities and occurrences that happen in their neighborhood. But rather than express concern about events that happen so close to them, these tenants act as bystanders who look but do not speak. In the few times that they are mentioned, they appear as irrelevant masses of dark faces observing what is happening on the street from a distance or hiding from disturbances behind closed doors. In *Crime Partners*, members of the organization murder a white policeman in the middle of the

night. As the narrator explains, ghetto dwellers are seen lurking along the edges of the action in an attempt to remain uninvolved:

> The few people living inside the condemned houses hadn't bothered to come outside to see what the gunshots were all about. They stayed in their homes, waiting out the noise of death and hoping against hope that none of the shots would hit them. Even though they lived in poverty and despair, none wanted to give up their meager existence of poor food and hopeless dreams. (*CP* 70)

In this grand scene of violence, Goines's mentioning of these ordinary people reads as a silent snapshot amidst the cacophony of minute warfare. Here, Kenyatta's moves are imagined in the same light in which the 1967 uprising played out—protestors expressing frustration on the street, while others remained indoors protecting their belongings and their lives. This pseudo-riot of sorts brings out the urgency by which ghetto dwellers had to both protect their lives and fight for them. Though the people here have few possessions, Kenyatta's mission argues that they are at risk of losing them and more if they insert themselves into the line of fire happening on the street. Touching upon the class aspects, Goines includes "hopeless dreams" of working class Detroit as one of these few possessions. This paradoxical signification reminds readers that it isn't the people who are hopeless, but their aspirations for a life without residential fear. Goines suggests that ghetto dwellers themselves are not entirely at fault for their socioeconomic position, but it is rather other insinuating factors such as the police who abuse their power and drug pushers who economically exploit the working class that influence the cycle of poverty in which they are trapped.

Goines distinguishes ghetto life from that of the country, or rural life, to expound on the social strains placed on black urban mobility. He contrasts the ghettoscape of Detroit with

Kenyatta's farm located almost an hour outside of the city limits. Though the farm is primarily used to train new recruits, it is also a space for members to use as a retreat from the harsh, unwelcoming city. With farm animals and several housing units, the farm is in some ways a world of its own wherein the members of the organization feel unbothered. As one of the members relays to two new comers:

> You just have to stay out here to understand it, man. You don't have no police harassment, and for a black man that is something in itself. A man can completely forget the color of his skin out here. It don't make no difference if you're black or green. Don't nobody bother you about it. Whereas, back in the city, a black man is constantly on his guard because of the white pigs fuckin' with him. (*CP* 125-126)

The speaker frames the environment as an autonomous refuge where its inhabitants live without the threat of physical harm. The farm, sitting on many of its own acres, is an isolated community from all sides. Unlike the ghetto, it is initially represented as a space that can be completely manipulated by Kenyatta at will; it is an oasis that he himself built. Though he controls the clubhouse as leader of his organization, it can at any time be under scrutiny by the police who at one point spy on the property. Such surveillance is likely not to occur in the country because there is no larger community to feel threated by the presence of a group of blacks. Still, as I will soon demonstrate, readers learn that even the farm is not totally a representation of black liberation in the way in which Kenyatta anticipated.

The Kenyatta series represents Goines's most overt investment in connecting his fiction with factual, historical narratives from the lived black experience in Detroit. Though the series is known for its critique of the Black Panther Party (BPP), Goines was also informed by Detroit's

own grassroots movement in black revolutionary thinking in the aftermath of the 1967 uprising. In the 1970s, he lived briefly in Los Angeles and directly experienced the culture of California that inspired much of the BPP's approach to community engagement and radical activism. He was also living in Los Angeles in the aftermath of the 1965 Watts rebellion, an event similar in scale to Detroit's 1967 uprising. Nevertheless, Goines was a product of a Detroit that had its own ties to black revolutionary ideology in a way that centers the Kenyatta series as a post-uprising work specific to the midwestern locale. Prior to the events of 1967, much of the activism and social movement organizing in Detroit was related to civil and labor rights. In the period after the uprising, activism and the political climate reflected more of the youthful energies that sprung up in response to the civil unrest. Joel Stone notes that "[t]elevision and newspapers showed images of angry youths with clenched fists in uniforms, in suits, and in traditional African garb. Even conservative ministers and politician[s] were seen in conversation with the militants" (245). Indeed, one unique attribute about post-uprising Detroit was the way in which religious leaders, such as Reverend Albert B. Cleage, Jr., attuned their thinking and community advocacy work to align with the revolutionary ideology. Thus, Detroiters saw the way in which the vibrant social movement within labor organizing before the uprisings was intermingled with issues related to racial discrimination in housing, policing, and the criminal justice system.

Such was the climate that the Black Panther Party, which was founded in California in 1966, entered when it formed a Detroit office on 16th Street in 1968. Stone notes that the BPP was as militaristic as it was militant. Differences in approach divided the group into two camps: those who were committed to community service, social services, and distributing the party's radical newspaper, and those who burglarized homes, harassed their enemies, and prepared arms for a battle they knew was sure to come. The Detroit chapter of the BPP eventually dissolved due

to increased infiltration by law enforcement and its inability within leadership to formulate a cohesive counterintelligence defense (Stone 246). Similar in scale to the BPP but more sophisticated, the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Africa (RNA) was formed in 1968 by Detroit brothers Milton and Richard Henry (later Gaidi Abiodum Obadele and Abubakari Obadele, respectively). As an offshoot of the Malcolm X Society, the organization presented a list of demands to the U.S. government that included an independent territory in the Southeastern United States, millions of dollars in reparations to the descendants of former slaves, and support to make black Americans self-sufficient. The RNA expected the government to reject all of these demands and in preparation formed an armed resistant paramilitary known as the Black Legion, which was similar to the Black Panthers. While this group garnered media attention, it did not represent the opinions and views of many black Detroiters. Even so, this is the local political climate in which Goines came into his artistry as a writer of urban fiction. Heeding these happenings in Detroit indicates how much his fiction was influenced by the strong sense and practice of activism in the city.

Crucial to Goines's comprehension of grassroots organizing and activism in post-uprisings Detroit was the way in which the city's youth were invested in ideologies of direct confrontation and self-defense. This is the channel by which he became interested in the intellectual framing of space, race, and liberation as a young adult coming of age in a time in which activists were doing away with the nonviolent-centered Civil Rights Movement of the South. Though Malcolm X was assassinated by the time Goines began writing his novels, his presence in Detroit was still felt, especially in the wake of the uprising in which many Detroit organizers used his writings and undertook his activist approach. Malcolm X, reared in Michigan and briefly known as "Detroit Red," was a figure who resonated with many of the youth who

came to national prominence for their opposition to nonviolent protests. While he did not advocate for violence without reason, Malcolm X was not opposed to violence in response to physical harassment. His approach to self-defense was more attractive to these activists who felt the Civil Rights Movement did not yield results quickly enough. In early November 1963, just seven years prior to the publication of Goines's first novel, Malcolm X delivered one of his most cited speeches at the Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference, which was organized by Reverend Albert B. Cleage, Jr. and the Group on Advanced Leadership. In "Message to the Grass Roots," Malcolm X argues for the legitimacy of violence within revolutionary efforts. He insists that the United States should expect violent confrontation on American soil in the same way that its government sanctions violence in wars fought abroad. After citing various revolutions in the United States, China, Russia, and Algeria, he concludes that a revolution involves bloodshed. In this way, Malcolm X says that "[t]here's no such thing as a nonviolent revolution. The only kind of revolution that is nonviolent is the Negro revolution." Conversely, he advocates for a revolution that employs violence as a defense for obtaining land: "Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality" (Malcolm X 9). This strategic use of language indicates that the "Negro revolution," or the Civil Rights Movement, is a popular notion of resistance that satisfies white America's fear of social change for the black agenda.

Kenyatta's approach to his revolutionary cleansing of black space can be drawn back to Malcolm X's speech that occurred almost a decade before Goines's series was published. In addition to justifying Kenyatta's use of violence, the language and references within Malcolm X's "Message to the Grass Roots" shed light on how Goines's references to African independence efforts suggest that the fight for black space in Detroit is linked to a larger tradition

of resistance within the African diaspora. In the first place, Goines creates a nexus between Kenyatta and other revolutionary figures of color as a way to legitimate Kenyatta's mission and to raise consciousness that ghetto liberation is related to a larger narrative of civil and human rights for people of color. Even Kenyatta's very namesake derives from local and diasporic origins. Popular notion dictates that the protagonist was named for Jomo Kenyatta, the Kenyan revolutionary leader of the Kenya African Army who was charged with spearheading the Mau Mau uprising. It seems likely that Goines's exposure to Malcolm X's ideology motivated him to name his protagonist for the Kenyan leader, for in Malcolm X's speech he cites that "[t]he Mau Mau, they were revolutionaries. They believed in scorched earth. They knocked everything aside that got in their way, and their revolution also was based on land, a desire for land" (8). Again, the invocation that Mau Mau's crusade was to protect land proved attractive enough for Goines to attach it to his critique of surveillance in black communities in the United States. And he was not the only one, for the previously cited August 1967 issue of *Life* indicates that among the attendees of the Black Power summit in Newark was Charles Kenyatta, founder and leader of the Harlem Mau Mau resistance group in Harlem. Influenced by the revolutionary philosophy of the 1960s that sought to draw parallels between contemporary and historical movements, Goines created a character who had a sense of cultural belonging within the African diaspora and was seemingly well-studied about political movements within and outside of the United States. Even the walls inside of Kenyatta's clubhouse are dressed with images of Che, Ho Chi Min, and other men of color who were committed to leading various revolutions and liberation efforts. Kenyatta's alignment with these cultural figures serves as justification for his aggressive approach to accomplish his goal. Having already threatened the pimps and prostitutes to move their business elsewhere, Kenyatta sees his plan as purely beneficial for his community even if

he has to indulge in reckless violence to do so. For Kenyatta, revolutionary change requires a "by any means necessary" approach.

Additionally, Goines employs the Algerian War within his critique of race and space, a historic event that was also invoked by Malcolm X. In *Kenyatta's Escape*, Kenyatta's farm is razed by the police and the army after the detectives learn that his organization is responsible for the many criminal offenses that were recently committed. As his farm is being raided, Kenyatta and select members of his crew hijack an airplane as a getaway from the law. While the crew doesn't initially tell the pilots in which direction to head after taking control of the aircraft of mostly white passengers, one of Kenyatta's men states, "you can bet it will be a black country" (*DL* 163). That country is soon revealed to be Algeria, and specifically its capital, Algiers. Goines's reference to Algiers points to two things: Algeria's fight for independence from France and the Algiers Motel incident that occurred during the 1967 uprising. Invoking Algeria, which was able to gain its independence and sovereignty as a nation, is one way for Goines to demonstrate that black liberation was possible. This is also something that Malcolm X draws on in his speech when he mentions that "[t]he Algerians were revolutionists; they wanted land. France offered to let them be integrated into France. They told France: to hell with France. They wanted some land, not some France. And they engaged in a bloody battle" (8-9). Much of Kenyatta's quests are somewhat related to the need for black men to have agency over their own mobility and access to equal civil liberties. More than with his reference to Jomo Kenyatta and the Mau Mau, Goines's inclusion of Algeria as a liberated space by and for black people is of great importance because it makes Kenyatta's violent plight seem all the more worthwhile. As someone in Kenyatta's entourage reinforces during the hijacking: "'Wherever we go, […] you can bet it will be where a Black man is treated like a man. Yes indeed! […] It's goin' sure 'nuff

be where a Black man can be a man'" (*KE* 13). This is the same rhetoric used to describe the farm that was at the same moment under attack by the state.

Still, I argue that the city of Algiers is also employed strategically to relate Goines's narrative to the Algiers Motel incident that references Detroit's own history of racial violence and racial injustice. The motel, once a luxurious manor house on the west side of Woodward Avenue in the Virginia Park neighborhood of central Detroit, had become a harbor for many forms of vice that included prostitution, drugs, gambling, and other criminal offenses. At the time of the uprising, the motel's clientele was almost entirely black (Fine 271). In the early morning hours of 26 July 1967, police officers raided the motel on the charge that someone reported hearing sniper shots coming from one of the rooms. In a series of events that have since garnered conflicting accounts by witnesses, three black men lay dead and more suffered physical assaults—all at the hands of law enforcement. Despite the evidence presented during trials, no one was convicted of these murders and the policemen were allowed to remain on the force. This incident remains one of the most cited cases of violence from the 1967 disturbance because it demonstrated the extent to which black fear of law enforcement was justified. Moreover, the case remains an example of the way in which the legal system often protects those who inflict police brutality rather than those who bear the brunt of it. Goines includes this heavily coded reference within the text as a reminder of the ways in which blacks are unprotected by law enforcement and the ways in which the criminal justice system is faulty. As Danielle L. McGuire states in her historical account of the Algiers Motel incident, "The story of the Algiers Motel murders captures, in its tragic horror, the often-hidden infrastructure of northern racism and white supremacy" (183). In this instance, Goines's fiction works to undo that silence. Kenyatta's insistence on going somewhere "where a Black man can be a man" is thus a moment of

recuperative justice. In that the Algiers Motel incident was a matter in which black men were murdered unjustly, Kenyatta's coded language indicates that he wants to return not in homage to the events, but to combat the audacity of law enforcement officials who felt justified in their actions that evening. This is just one way that Goines's representation of the ghetto pushes his readers toward sociopolitical engagement, by recognizing that historical incidents of injustice should still be interrogated as they remain relevant to present-day racial inequalities.

Policing (While Black) in Post-Uprising Detroit

An understanding of race and race relations is absolutely central to Goines's literary representation of ghetto life, especially as the Kenyatta series is a post-uprising narrative closely tied to racial injustice. These four novels focus heavily on the physical and psychological divides between blacks and whites in 1970s Detroit. In the same way that he conceives of space as a race-based concept, I argue that Goines focuses on race relations within a police force that also implements racist protocols within its patrolling of a black residential area, to draw out how civic authorities cannot or refuse to fully understand the urgency behind the need for social change that ghetto dwellers want. Goines uses the racial divides that exist along the lines of space to expound on systemic issues that blacks face in the aftermath of World War II. In the Kenyatta series, he explores race relations through an interracial pair of detectives who are in pursuit of Kenyatta and his organization for their violent crimes. Much of the plot of the novels is motivated by these two detectives from the Detroit Police Department, the same police force the militant group aims to eradicate from its community. Benson, a black detective, and Ryan, a white detective, appear prominently in all four novels as controlled variables that represent the cityscape of Detroit, which exists exterior to the inner workings of the insular ghetto. In what

follows, I demonstrate how Goines writes the ever-present conflict between Benson's subject position as a black man, his professional life on a mostly white police force, and his relationship—or lack thereof—with the black community in which he is assigned to work. Goines explores the contours of the black psyche in confrontation with the racial divide as the detective contends with working in the black community as a policeman, a direct opposition to the black agenda of alleviating structures of oppression from the ghetto.

The police play an important role in Goines's ghetto epic as their representation reflects the blame black Detroiters placed on the Detroit Police Department (DPD) for inciting the events of 1967. Goines employs the police in his fictional narrative as a means to explore the power that racial discrimination wields over blacks and black residential space. As previously noted, race relations began to change in the aftermath of the flames and arms of civil uproar because many whites saw the power of black restlessness. Whites began to fear blacks even more, leaving the city for refuge in the suburbs. Though policing nationwide was criticized by activists, scholars, and artists alike, the police only grew more aggressive in their audacious methods of abusing their authority in marginal communities of color. Still, the DPD attempted to reckon with this change and began to address community concerns. This is the backdrop in which Benson and Ryan's relationship becomes important for Goines's critique of policing black neighborhoods. The team, and Benson in particular, also complicate Kenyatta's mission, for Kenyatta makes every effort to not kill black officers, which leaves Benson's relationship and dedication to his partner constantly hanging in the balance. In the second installment of the series, we learn that Benson is so close to Ryan that he once took a bullet for him in the line of duty. The two have been working together for so long that one often knows what the other is thinking even if he doesn't say it. This professional friendship blooms in the midst of a police department that is not

even supportive of Benson because of his race. As I will point out shortly, Benson's subject position as a working professional who is representative of a systematically oppressive institution confronts his dedication to his own race in policing the ghetto and his personal experiences of racism even within that very job. As such, Benson represents one of the most complex characters in the story because of the double-consciousness he inhabits on a daily basis in his profession, unlike the other black characters in the novel who live in the racially homogenous ghetto.

Though the police have always had a contested relationship with racial minorities, and blacks in particular, their relationship to black residential spaces grew more forceful and harmful during the synergistic climate of the 1960s. As John L. Cooper states,

> The very structure of American society was shaken. The nation seemed to be teetering on the brink of social chaos and anarchy. Richard Nixon was elected president in 1968 in part because of his strong stand for "law and order," and it was this same public attitude that pushed the police to the forefront. They were now seen as the nation's first line of defense against this internal threat to security. (5)

Such "law and order" meant that black city dwellers suffered more in and after the 1960s because their civic responses were not addressed but instead misread as sudden outbursts of physical destruction in need of governmental control. The introduction of even more police in black communities meant that blacks were still losing control of their own space. If the ghetto was a space quarantined from privileges given to whites in metropolitan areas, at this point it functioned as an entrapment more than ever—regulated by systematic sociopolitical measures and by state representatives such as the police who controlled black physical mobility. In the

ghettoscape that Goines delivers, the police represent the prevailing fact that no matter how much the characters are able to manipulate their own reality within the ghetto, they will eternally be in conflict with the police—outside agents sent to maintain dominance within.

Black Detroit's relationship with the police fared no better than the national trend of civic surveillance. Melba Joyce Boyd, Detroit native and longtime professor at Wayne State University, reflects that "[i]f you were black and living in pre-Coleman Young Detroit, you never called the police for help because they only made matters worse" (Boyd 165).[16] Boyd recalls as a high school student seeing her classmates physically abused by the police for "reckless eyeballing" during an encounter with the Big Four. Usually a large unmarked car such as a DeSota or a Buick, the Big Four consisted of three plainclothesmen and one uniformed driver who handled the felony runs in each precinct. Because the factors of dress and the chosen vehicles posed a front of intimidation, the Big Four inevitably found themselves in conflict with many young black men as they made their scheduled stops (Joel 138, Locke 152). The Big Four was one of DPD's protocols that caused Detroit's black citizens to distrust the police; it created distance between the agents of the community that were supposed to be implementing safety.

The fear, disdain, and distrust of police was partly a result of the low percentage of black officers in the DPD well into the 1960s. Despite the fact that Detroit had a sizable percentage of black citizens, this same population was not reflected in the agents that were sent to patrol black communities. In addition to the threats and physical assaults inflicted by the Big Four, twelve blacks were killed by white officers between 1958 and 1961. In all cases, the deaths were ruled justifiable by the county prosecutor (Elkins 112). Like community members, black officers also had a difficult time with white officers and the DPD that defended them. Black officers who

[16] Coleman Young was Detroit's first black mayor. He served the city for five terms, helping to decrease racist police practices and increasing the percentage of black officers in the Detroit Police Department.

attempted to speak against the harsh treatment of their white colleagues faced backlash and workplace harassment that made it even more difficult for them to effectively perform their duties. Such advocacy also put them at risk of losing their hard-earned jobs (Cooper 113). To address the ongoing problems between the community and the police, the department hired Hubert G. Locke to serve as the administrative assistant to the Detroit Commissioner of Police. Locke notes that when he was recruited in 1966, there were only 137 or 138 black officers out of the 4,000 sworn officers in the city. All of these officers were in the patrol ranks, except for two who had risen to precinct captain and chief of police. This was the first problem he sought to fix. Because the city was twenty-five percent black at the time, he advised the commissioner to allow the entrance class of newly-sworn police to reflect this same twenty-five percent (Locke 152).

Similar to his scripting of race and space, Goines's depiction of the police is primarily invoked through concepts of racial and physical divides. As a black detective who is assigned to work in the black community, Benson straddles the line between his black subjectivity and his professional position as an officer of the law, which Goines portrays as working against people of color. Benson is stuck between the black world of which he is a full citizen, and the white world of the police force in which he encounters difficulty despite his high-ranking status as a detective. This dichotomy is apparent upon Benson's first appearance in the series entering a crime scene:

> Benson stared out at the sea of black faces watching him. They were curious about him, another black man. Yet this one was on the other side of the line. There he stood, behind the police line where only the so-called "important people" should be. (CP 26)

Here, race is used as the principle factor of separation between the police and civilians. In writing this tension between two sides via the concept of "the line," Goines evokes W. E. B. Du Bois's assertion at the turn of the century that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (Du Bois 3). While Du Bois was referencing the general social divide between races and the pervasive persistence of anti-black racism, Goines is specifically invested in demonstrating the sociopolitical ramifications of racial difference perpetuated by law enforcement, an institution that has historically exploited this divide. This reference to Du Bois's double consciousness foreshadows Benson's development throughout the narrative, for he rarely aligns himself with the other black characters. Benson has a constant dilemma between wanting to express his feelings as a black man but also wanting to remain professional and nonconfrontational while on the job. As a character who exists between two raced realities, his internal thoughts are often at odds with the way in which he has to go about his work.

In addition to the contestation between the white police force and the black community, Goines also uses the personal relationship between the two detectives as an arena to explore how public and personal relationships were tested in the aftermath of the uprisings. Through Benson, Goines explores the feelings of rejection and treason that black officers often faced in being denied full social acceptance amongst their white colleagues while simultaneously being seen as traitors by the black community. As a black detective in a predominantly white police department, Benson faces discrimination and adversity from various ranks, including rookie officers. Just minutes after arriving on the scene and immediately following Goines's description of "the line," Benson is almost shot and killed by a rookie cop who mistakes him for a member of the community. As Benson enters the crime scene to assess the situation, the cop comes behind him and orders him to stop, in a "harsh southern voice":

> "Put your hands up on that fuckin' wall," the officer ordered loudly. "What's wrong, boy? You hard of hearing or something, nigger?" the policeman continued as Benson refused to follow his demand.
>
> No matter what you did, or what you became, the thought flashed through Benson's mind, you'd always be a nigger to some of these hillbilly bastards. (*CP* 27)

While the story is set in Detroit at this point, Goines uses the popularized trope of the poor white Southerner as a stand-in for a general brand of toxic whiteness. As the South is often seen as the primary source of brutal anti-black racism, the police officer's hatred toward Benson indicates that racism is unescapable even in the urban North. Goines refers to the cop as a "hillbilly bastard," a term often reserved for poor whites. This class difference is significant because it goes beyond the fact that Benson is the cop's superior. In spite of his socioeconomic background or professional ranking, the rookie cop understands his position as a white police officer to assume authority over all blacks. Benson's job is thus somewhat dangerous, as he always has to encounter colleagues who may mistake him for a civilian rather than one of their own. Additionally, this early moment in the narrative brings readers directly into contact with the harm police can impose on their own colleagues, let alone what they are capable of inflicting upon civilians they are meant to protect.

Though Benson has learned to not mention when racial microaggressions bother him, his silent agitation is nonetheless noted by Ryan. Benson repeatedly tests this boundary of understanding, most likely because he feels more comfortable with his partner than with other officers in the precinct. These tests are also moments in which Benson can somewhat safely

express his innermost thoughts on racial discrimination in ways that aren't received as too aggressive or accusatory. On one such event, the two detectives are scoping out Kenyatta's clubhouse from a distance when they notice a white man frantically exit his car and enter the establishment. Questioning why he would venture into a black neighborhood to see someone such as Kenyatta, Ryan starts to write down the license plate number to run when they return to the office. Benson can't help but think that if the man were black, Ryan would suggest that they immediately stop and interrogate him. Noting the consequences of the possibility that the white man is a wealthy and influential businessman who could jeopardize the detectives' relationship with their supervisor, Benson is nonetheless propelled to propose that they interrogate him to see his partner's reaction:

> Benson had to laugh sardonically as he thought about it: all those black men who were stopped daily, even with their wives along, and searched out on the streets for no other reason than that they were black. The officers who stopped them believed all black men did something wrong, so they had a right to stop and frisk any black man they saw. But it was so different when it came to a white man. *Oh God, so much different*, he moaned. (*DL* 48-49, emphasis in the original)

Benson challenges his partner in the same way that he is meant to feel uncomfortable by white officers' snide remarks and the disrespect they show by ignoring his presence and authority. The tests that Benson gives Ryan are also moments in which he expresses the same injustice that fuels Kenyatta's mission, even though he doesn't always recognize and acknowledge their similarities. His testimony here highlight's Kenyatta's sentiments of the daily oppression that black men in particular feel when dealing with police. In spite of their marital status that is meant

to signify a sense of social and moral legitimacy, black men still face adversity and are seen as suspect and criminal threats by the police.

Despite Benson's internal struggle to feel comfortable in his blackness while on the job, he often distances himself from the other blacks within the ghetto. In many ways, Benson experiences the ghetto in much the same ways that white police officers do—as a place of work rather than a disenfranchised community. Though he is one of few black cops in the department, Benson does not model himself as a person of color in a privileged role who could be of assistance to the black community. He is more concerned with solving the case than with serving as a community resource. In the scene when he first appears, the "sea of black faces" looks at him in profound curiosity, a black man who has been able to work the ranks to maintain a job of political and social importance. On the other hand, Benson does not dwell on his shared racial identification during this distanced confrontation with the community. This distance from the black community prevents him from understanding Kenyatta's motive as black liberation efforts. Though Benson is a black man, there is still a socioeconomic difference between what he sees while working in the ghetto and what others witness living there. When Ryan speculates early on that the recent murders may be the work of one of the "militant organizations" that is trying to clean the streets up, Benson unconvincingly replies, "Clean the streets up? Clean them up of what? Police?" (*CP* 85). As a member of the state who has taken an oath to "protect and serve" his city, Benson cannot imagine why someone would want to commit murder as a feasible means of safety even after he himself is almost killed by a co-worker who aims to shoot based only on race. He is only able to gather a sliver of empathy and align his blackness with other blacks after witnessing several of Kenyatta's colleagues murdered by the police at the raid on the farm. The shootout at the farm is one of the most important scenes in the series because before this, the

only evidence of police discrimination, aside from Kenyatta's verbal accounts, is the instance in which Benson is almost shot in the beginning of the narrative. In any event, the raid leaves many members of the organization and eight police officers dead. Benson himself shoots and kills Ali, Kenyatta's second in command who was in the process of aiming for Ryan.

The raid is also very vital to Goines's critique of police in black communities because it underscores his main point that blacks are not safe anywhere under police jurisdiction. Army tanks are called in to assist in the matter after the police decide that they need backup controlling the residents on the farm, who put up a fierce battle against cops who have not offered a reason for their visit. In the midst of this warfare, Benson realizes that the other police officers and soldiers present have no empathy for the black people on the farm. For Benson, it seems as if the soldiers think the shoot-out is a game rather than a form of violence in which actual lives are at stake. Even when some of the people retreat from their cabins to surrender, they are viciously shot down. For some reason, it does not occur to Benson that he is shooting a group of exclusively blacks until he enters the house at the end of the shootout. He wonders to himself if the tanks would have been used if the people of the farm had been white. These internal thoughts come as a reaction to the sense of war that he feels is being waged by the police and army. This is the only moment that Benson is aligned with their cause, even though it is one that is solely the fight for their very lives:

> With eight policemen killed, the newspapers would play it up big. This was the first time to his memory that any Black or white crooks had ever made such a dent in the police forces at a single shoot-out. Instantly he felt ashamed of the feeling of pride in what the Black men and women had done. After all, he was an officer also, and these were his comrades, so there was nothing to be proud about. Eight

> of his fellow officers lay dead, and there had been a good chance of him being one of those with the sheet over his head. (*KE* 50)

This is the clearest example of the internal struggle that Benson has been dealing with on his current assignment. Before this incident, Benson had seen several of Kenyatta's people dead because of their affiliation with the organization. However, this is the first time that the detective actually witnesses the irrational killing of blacks, some of whom had even surrendered. He is only able to feel proud of the fight that Kenyatta's people put up after seeing this massacre, which he partly blames himself for. Nevertheless, this empathetic moment is short lived, for Benson still considers these people to be "crooks" and must continue to complete the task of capturing Kenyatta.

From the use of brute police and military force in black space, it seems that Goines wants this depiction of the raid to be read as a reflection of the events that commonly occurred during 1960s uprisings. Choosing to call the incident a "raid" is almost synonymous with the term "riot" that is used to describe the historical event in popular culture and historical accounts. With a keen focus on how the police invade the countryside and murder a large group of racial minorities, Goines points to the police as inciters of the tragedy, not the residents who are only defending themselves. This massacre also undercuts the organization's assertation that they were free from the harassment faced in the city. In having the farm raided by the police, Goines illuminates that there is no place in the United States in which it is safe to be black, especially when confronted by the police. To this end, his critique of law enforcement renders the police as detrimental to the upward mobility, safety, and mental development of blacks. While most literary depictions of the black ghetto focus on the working class, Goines's inclusion of Detective Benson also takes into consideration the extent to which the black middle class—even

those who work as police themselves—are nonetheless targets of police brutality and the trauma and mental frustration that accompany interacting with law enforcement.

Even in his post-uprising novels that are meant to empower the black underclass to fight back against oppression, Goines remains steadfast in acknowledging that overthrowing white power and privilege is no easy feat. It is for this reason that his protagonist never achieves his goal. Though he manages to find the wealthy white man who is responsible for most of the drugs that are trafficked into Detroit's ghetto in a Las Vegas penthouse, Kenyatta is murdered by this man's entourage in the process of an assassination attempt of his own. Kenyatta's defeat may be read as Goines's own defeat in never fully recovering from his drug addiction. But, more importantly, the protagonist's defeat signifies that the power of whiteness is so influential that it takes more than the will power and perseverance of one person alone. This goes back to Malcolm X's "Message to the Grass Roots," which argued that African nations such as Nigeria were able to gain their independence through violent self-defense. In this way, Goines likens the white drug dealer to European nations that exploited African resources for their own economic gain. Kenyatta realizes that the trafficking of drugs into the ghetto has persisted because the black underclass does not have the resources to overcome their drug addictions. Reclaiming the ghettoscape for its black residents would be the first steps in securing a healthy environment for black uplift and socioeconomic advancement. It would also ensure, at the very least, that the ghetto would be a safe place rather than one that retained and recycled habits of vice.

As post-uprising literature, the Kenyatta series is concerned with highlighting anti-black systemic practices that retain black Americans within cycles of poverty and socioeconomic dependence. The series is also invested in using revolutionary models to bring about the change needed to benefit the black working class community, even if that means using violence as a

means of liberation. For this reason, the most important take away from the series is that though Kenyatta is unsuccessful in killing the central powerhouse of the drug trafficking operation, he is nonetheless successful in locating it. In the same way that Malcolm X approached the "grass roots," or the local residents and activists who were working toward social change in Detroit, Goines's message to the black ghetto was to bring to light the unbearable power of whiteness that maintains black immobility.

Conclusion

With the onset of civil responses to racial injustice such as Detroit's 1967 uprising, the ghetto became a space for residents to defend rather than one they were attempting to leave just decades before. As post-uprising novels, the four books that comprise Donald Goines's Kenyatta series provide a representation of black urban space that critiques systems of racial injustice against blacks through the momentum of Detroit's vigorous local activism and the revolutionary ideologies of Malcolm X. More than a writer of extravagant entertainment, Goines formulated ghetto realities in his prose as a way to connect with other working class blacks and to participate in a form of community engagement. While other people turned to leaders such as Malcolm X, Goines embedded his fiction with similar philosophies that would reach the underclass who were typically the subject and intended audience of these street lit novels. Though Goines represents the realities of black ghetto life that are often unpretty, he does not totally glorify excessive drug use or let Kenyatta's violence go unjustified. Thus, the series pushes for liberating black residential space from the overarching control of the police and wealthy white people who take advantage of the black underclass. Simultaneously, Goines invokes resistance efforts in other nations as a way to relate black American ghetto dwellers to the people in the African diaspora

who fought for and gained their independence from European control that aimed to exploit African resources. Motivated to dismantle the powers of white control exerted by the police force and the drug industry, Kenyatta's sole mission is to reclaim black space as a place for the growth of the black social, political, and economic sphere. Though the series takes place in the Detroit ghetto, it concludes in a high-end hotel in Las Vegas. The great distance between these two environments—both in terms of geography and class—features the black ghetto as an entity controlled and manipulated by anti-black disenfranchisement by the white and wealthy. Where these people see trafficking drugs into black communities as business deals, they remain unconcerned with how addiction is plaguing the lives of the black underclass. For Goines, this means that working class blacks are given minimal opportunity to better their socioeconomic situation and are kept within a cycle of poverty through such things as drug trafficking, which contributes to the steady growth of white wealth.

Rather than reading Goines as a writer of black urban life generally, my analysis repositions Goines specifically within the locale of post-uprising Detroit in order to bring perspective about the intentionality behind his work. In building an urban epic in which a black protagonist attempts to build a coalition against regimes of power that render his black community powerless, Goines's critique in the Kenyatta series indicates that working class people recognize the systems of oppression that are working against them. And for those that are not knowledgeable, Goines uses his position as a writer whose work is marketed to his target audience of the black underclass to expound on the systematic factors of racist policing and capitalist greed that contribute to the cycle of poverty that ensure that blacks never leave the ghetto for more fruitful socioeconomic environments. The Kenyatta series is representative of the hope that Goines proclaims is instilled in ghetto power. Though the ghetto epic that Goines

writes is relatable to many black urban communities throughout the United States, the Kenyatta series is all about the histories, struggles, and strength of black Detroit and it always will be.

Chapter Four:
A No Limit (Ghetto) Culture

Since the birth of hip hop in the 1970s, poor and working class black communities have used hip hop to understand the world around them and to make meaning of their experience. Southern writer Jesmyn Ward picks up on the role of knowledge production within hip hop by including quotes from Southern rap in epigraphs to her first two novels. She says that "Hip-hop, which is my generation's blues, is important to the characters that I write about. They use hip-hop to understand the world through language" (Hoover). Conceived in New York City, hip hop found a home with Southerners who used their regional culture to produce music that spoke to their own realities. Though these realities and new styles were not initially accepted by New Yorkers who were convinced that hip hop belonged to the Northeast, they were nonetheless urban in their own way. In another interview, Ward notes, "Hip-hop didn't really blow up for us in the South until after NWA, and then we started getting some people from the south like 8-Ball and MJG and UGK, reinterpreting hip hop in a southern way. It was so good having someone talk about the realities of where we were from, and doing it in a way that lyrically, and sonically resonated with us" (Berry). Growing up as a young, black girl in between Mississippi and Louisiana, Ward has written extensively about her own family's working class realities, most especially as they relate to intersections of class and race. In her memoir, *Men We Reaped*, she tells of the devastating effect that crack had on her community and the personal losses of family and friends that she experienced since leaving home for college. In her vivid descriptions of place, Ward often captures the songs she and her peers were listening to at the moment that they

found out about someone's death or in the moments in the wake of these atrocities. In this way, her memoir also contains a soundtrack of the hip hop music that working class black Southern youth used to cope during the crack epidemic and to make sense of it. It is but one example of how a ghetto culture of coping grew out of the crack epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s.

Master P (born Percy Miller) is one of the chief rappers in the 1990s who grappled with the devastating effects of drugs in impoverished black residential areas during the urban crisis. Though he remains one of the most understudied hip hop artists, his lengthy discography exhibits that Master P intellectually conceptualizes the black urban landscape in unprecedented ways for a gangsta rapper in the wake of hip hop going commercial. In fact, he includes the word "ghetto" in several projects, including: *The Ghettos Tryin to Kill Me!* (1994), *Ghetto D* (1997), *Ghetto Postage* (2000), and *Ghetto Bill* (2005). As a young black man who lived in the Calliope Projects that gained national attention for its high rates of crime and poverty, Master P undoubtedly witnessed firsthand how black communities that were already on the brink of decline went spiraling downward after crack became easily accessible on street corners. Reared in the housing projects of New Orleans, Master P left home to attend the University of Houston on a basketball scholarship before relocating to Richmond, California. There, he was influenced by West Coast gangsta rap to produce, market, and sell his own music that spoke to his own experiences in the South. Forming No Limit Records, Master P returned to his native New Orleans for inspiration and to recruit other artists such as Mystikal, Mia X, and Silkk the Shocker to include within the bigger picture he had for his record label, ultimately becoming one of hip hop's first successful empires to include music, film, and other entrepreneurial ventures.

Within hip hop studies, Master P is often cited in reference to his business model that led No Limit Records to reach high levels of financial success. What is often left out of No Limit's

groundbreaking reputation is the manner in which its artists were able to capitalize on their native Southern culture within the genre of West Coast-born gangsta rap. In discussions of gangsta rap, Southern artists are almost never mentioned. This chapter disrupts this silence, calling attention to the ways in which Master P uses the gangsta mentality to speak to Southern audiences. The birth of gangsta rap is often credited to Niggaz Wit Attitude (or NWA) in the late 1980s. With songs like "Gangsta Gangsta," "Straight Outta Compton," "Fuck the Police," and "Appetite for Destruction," NWA entered the hip hop scene in such an abrasive manner that many American audiences were unprepared to digest their image or their messages. They spoke against police brutality and the sanctities of whiteness and the middle class with unapologetic language and demeanor. As four young black men from Compton, California, their message was loud and clear: they would be the very enemy that the racist rhetoric of the state set them out to be. By the time that NWA responded to the deindustrialization that influenced the socioeconomic downfall of many working class communities of color in the late 1980s, the ghetto had already become a fixture within popular culture images and iconography. Whereas NWA was concerned with dispelling myths about the police and urban decline, No Limit artists were more concerned about another consequence of the urban crisis—the ongoing drug problem in their communities and the troubles that it brought to black families and young people, in particular, who were dying at alarming rates.

In this chapter, I argue that Master P manipulates the form of gangsta rap to critically engage with the crack epidemic in black communities in the 1990s by promoting a ghetto culture that is invested in solidarity and perseverance in the face of systematic oppression. First, I demonstrate how Master P conceives of the complexity posed by the drug trade through songs that glorify profiting from drug addiction and others that warn of its dangers. While he maintains

the gangsta persona in his music, he also exhibits a vulnerability that details the consequential anxiety drug dealers face within street economies where gun violence is rampant. As such, his music is a testament to the ways in which street warfare during the crack epidemic and civic disinterest in black welfare contribute to feelings of social death among ghetto dwellers. Secondly, I argue that Master P's ghetto memorial commemorating those lost to drugs and street violence reverses Bryan J. McCann's notion of the "mark of criminality" by acknowledging the humanity of the black underclass whose lives are considered insignificant to the state. Finally, attending to both the drug trade and the consequential ghetto memorial, I demonstrate that Master P's lyrical representation of the 1990s black American ghetto constructs a ghetto culture that is predicated on survival by giving a language for black youth to collectively and privately heal from crack-inflicted violence.

I define ghetto culture as a system of meanings and practices created by poor and working class black residents who live within cycles of disenfranchisement that cannot easily be escaped. If the ghettoscape is the attempt to overcome cycles of poverty, then ghetto culture is the mechanism used to cope with the effects of the ghettoscape. I ground my work on ghetto culture within the cultural turn where historians began to perceive of culture as a set of shared meanings and practices among a group of people. In *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*, William H Sewell, Jr. notes that at the same time of the cultural turn within the field of history, there was widespread interest in studying culture across the humanities. In describing what we now consider the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies, Sewell states, "In literary studies, the key move was to use the now dominant post-structuralist theoretical categories to analyze text analogues previously regarded as outside the canon of literature: popular fiction, science writing, film, journalism, television, museums, advertising, hip-hop—in

short, culture in general" (54). Through his discussion of Clifford Geertz and David Schneider, Sewell says that "[t]he point of conceptualizing culture as a system of symbols and meanings is to detangle, for the purpose of analysis, the semiotic influences on action from the other sorts of influences—demographic, geographic, biological, technological, economic, and so on—that they are necessarily mixed with in any concrete sequence of behavior" (160). Sewell states that culture as practice is related to such things as resistance, history, and politics. Culture, in essence, can be thought of as a toolkit.

From the perspective of cultural studies, I am interested in how ghetto culture derives from a shared knowledge production that is unique to the social construction of the environment. My definition of ghetto culture is derived from inspecting this knowledge production through analyses of cultural productions rather than the study of human interaction. In short, I am interested in how cultural producers make and share knowledge via expressive arts. My approach differs from that of scholars such as Ulf Hannerz, who provides a convincing explanation of ghetto culture in *Soulside: Inquiries Into Ghetto Culture and Community* (1969), but from the anthropological view of studying people through observation and participation. He is more interested in the ways in which ghetto residents live amongst each other and within the realm of what he calls "mainstream society." His analysis remains useful for thinking about ghetto life as a reaction to a culture of poverty that stems from social conditions rather than communal volition of the working class. Even more, scholars such as Michael Eric Dyson and Tricia Rose have provided nuanced ways of discussing ghetto culture within hip hop. Still, in noting that culture is always in the process of reinvention, my work here centers ghetto culture of the 1990s era of gangsta rap within the social conditions of the crack epidemic, which remains a defining factor in the structure of the ghetto and black working class life towards the end of the twentieth century.

Despite the fundamental ways in which the black underclass produces a productive ghetto culture out of what has been unequally distributed to them, that culture is often misconstrued as black dysfunctional culture to those who exist outside of the ghetto or to those who don't recognize the value in ghetto culture. Both Tricia Rose and Cornel West have commented on how black culture is often taken out of context of the society structures and institutions of which it is a part. Rose argues:

> All culture is both created and reinforced by environmental and social contexts. When we think of society's structures, too often we consider only political and economic systems, neglecting to include culture. Culture is not an independent, self-generating set of transitory behaviors and values. It is part and parcel of our society's structures. As Cornel West has rightly argued, culture is "as much a structure as the economy or politics; it is rooted in institutions such as families, schools, churches, synagogues, mosques, and communication industries (television, radio, video, music). Similarly, the economy and politics are not only influenced by values but also promote particular cultural ideals of the good life and good society." Because culture is so rooted in the institutions that shape our society as a whole, it is absurd to talk about black cultural dysfunction as if black people reside in total cultural and social isolation from all the main institutions in American society. (2008, 67)

My argument that Master P's ghetto culture functions as a productive means of healing is rooted in Rose's assessment that culture is tied to systems, institutions, and structures. In the case of black ghetto dwellers who exist within generational cycles of poverty because of the way in which systemic racism has denied blacks equal opportunity to educational, political, and

socioeconomic advancement, then, ghetto culture is a product of political structures that deny the black working class adequate resources to combat poverty. And while ghetto culture doesn't aim to undo the structures that contain the black underclass within the grasp of disenfranchisement, it does work to make meaning out of an experience in which black humanity is deemed insignificant and void of civic agency.

My analysis of Master P's ghetto culture as a coping mechanism expands on the work of hip hop studies scholars who have established how gangsta rappers use music and performance in response to the criminal justice system, police brutality, unequal socioeconomic opportunities, and housing inequality. Most notably, Bryan J. McCann notes that gangsta rap artists from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s were rhetorically responding to what he calls the "mark of criminality," which describes how black youths are depicted as criminals through rhetorics of law and order, most especially during the War on Poverty. According to McCann, gangsta rap artists modify signs of racial fear ascribed to them by performing a brand of blackness that favors hypermasculinity, hyperviolence, and hypersexuality. By underscoring how cultural discourses criminalize black bodies and communities, McCann demonstrates that many of the features of gangsta rap—including its celebratory relationship to misogyny, violence, and monetary gain—are enacted as resources to combat discourses and political motives that position blackness as dangerous. While McCann is more concerned with West Coast rap acts, I contend that Master P innovatively reverses the mark of criminality by employing the ghetto memorial as a tribute to the unadulterated humanity of the black underclass who have been susceptible to social death under the grasp of the crack epidemic. Furthermore, Joseph Winters has likened certain hip hop songs to W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of the sorrow songs (or Negro spirituals), arguing that rap artists employ vulnerabilities in songs of mourning and hope so that listeners are more attuned to

such themes as loss and suffering within a musical genre which is popularly conceived as harsh, illicit, and offensive. Coincidently, Winters does not include any gangsta rap artists in the four rap acts that he discusses. I argue that by centering the Southern gangsta rapper, we get a specific brand of the sorrow song that engages the profound effects of the urban crisis that involved high rates of death among black youth in the 1990s. Engaging the sorrow song as a ghetto memorial allows for a greater understanding of the need to personalize these songs for a demographic that is, in so many ways, left to fester within cycles of poverty along the margins of society. If Winters argues that the sorrow song in hip hop is about displaying a vulnerability and echoing messages of hope, I contend that Master P's ghetto memorial is also about bearing witness to the socioeconomic conditions of the urban crisis that rendered the black underclass unworthy of state support or protection. Thus, even as Master P's music celebrates gun violence and the drug trade, a deeper analysis of his lyrics within these two critical frameworks of the mark of criminality and the sorrow song allows for a more nuanced consumption of his work that also reframes the popular narrative that black ghetto youth are inherently attracted to and purposefully engage in criminal activities.

I contend that Southern gangsta rap formulates an active ghetto culture that's predicated on surviving political systems bent on criminalizing black humanity. Since gangsta rap developed in response to the urban and socioeconomic decline of the cityscape, an understanding of how rappers discuss their space and what conditions contribute to their representations of the ghetto is crucial. Moreover, since hip hop grew to prominence during the War on Drugs, I posit that hip hop studies should perform thorough analyses of how lethal narcotics ravished black residential space. In *The 'Hood comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop,* Murray Foreman accounts for the ways in which space and place fit within hip hop. While he

focuses on explaining and theorizing how such notions as "the ghetto" and "the hood" play out in the music, Foreman fails to account for the social, economic, and political conditions that influence hip hop artists' conceptualization and representation of their space. It is nearly impossible to discuss space and place within hip hop from a historical stance without underscoring how aggressively the crack economy attacked working class black communities and how that devastation influenced much of the music beginning in the late 1980s. On the other hand, in *5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and the War on Drugs*, Dimitri A. Bogazianos provides a very astute analysis of hip hop's relationship to the crack epidemic by discussing how rap artists equate the music industry with the crack economy to show how both exploit the black working class and how the black underclass display new moral orders that have risen not only from the consequential socioeconomic effects of crack but also from the punitive measures enforced by the federal government. I argue that by taking such work on criminalization into consideration, we uncover how ghetto culture is formulated in response to the issues that Bogazianos highlights

In representing the ghetto, Master P routinely addresses the production and trafficking of crack in an attempt to account for what it brought to black communities and what it took away. In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how Donald Goines wrote about the effects of heroin and cocaine on black families and communities in the 1970s because the author himself was addicted to heroin. Still grappling with issues related to substance abuse, especially as soldiers were returning from the Vietnam War with new drug habits, black communities suffered even more as a new narcotic drastically hit working class areas in the 1980s—crack, a cheap and lethally addictive form of cocaine. Michael Eric Dyson notes that the CIA turned a blind eye as Nicaraguan rebels funneled thousands of tons of cocaine into the United States to fund a

counterrevolution against the Nicaraguan government in the 1980s (2007, 83). This single scheme generated a crack epidemic in black and brown communities on the West Coast and quickly swept urban areas throughout the country. To provide a sense of how addictive crack is, George Nelson notes that while heroin has an effect that lasts for hours, crack provides a brief high that leaves users desiring another dose soon afterwards (42). Because of the high demand for crack, the drug trade became a viable option for poor black youth who needed to make a way for themselves or to financially contribute to their families. This profession offered more freedom than a regular full-time job and promised more and faster money if done correctly and efficiently. In this way, the drug trade itself became an addiction for those who entered and stayed in it because of the power and authority one could assume on neighborhood streets if successful. This type of empowerment was influential for young people living in marginalized communities that were already rendered powerless and inconsequential to the state.

Nevertheless, although drug trafficking offered the black underclass opportunities to earn high levels of financial capital, residents of these communities who developed drug addictions had few resources to combat their substance abuse. As black communities across the nation suffered from the addictive nature of crack, families witnessed those around them endure unemployment, homelessness, and death. Some addicts were even shunned by loved ones, which only contributed to their narcotic plight. Even people who were stable citizens with viable means of employment were among those who lost everything during the crack epidemic.

Furthermore, the proliferation of gun violence in gangsta rap is a historical documentation of how the crack epidemic entered and nested in black communities with potent force. As gangsta rap is meant to detail the gangsta lifestyle of the urban areas hit most profoundly by crack, Master P's lyrics are informed by how easily automatic weapons became

available to the American public, and black streets in particular. As crack became a staple in American cities, so too did bigger and more lethal guns on street corners (Nelson 42; Dyson 2007, 82). These guns—used as means of force, protection, and retaliation in the trafficking of drugs—drove the murder rates of cities such as Detroit, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles to record historic levels. Master P's music demonstrates that exposure to drugs and violence was common in ghettos throughout the nation—they were an expected part of growing up both black and poor.

This chapter shifts attention from the "ghettocentric" identity proposed in 1990s hip hop scholarship to analyzing the language of ghetto culture as a means to uncover how hip hop responses to the urban crisis contained productive ways of living through harsh realities. In his discussion of West Coast gangsta rap, Robin D.G. Kelley argues:

> When they are not describing prison or death, they describe daily life in the "ghetto"—an overcrowded world of deteriorating tenement apartments or tiny cement block, prisonlike "projects," streets filthy from the lack of city services, liquor stores and billboards selling malt liquor and cigarettes. The construction of the "ghetto" as a living nightmare and "gangstas" as products of that nightmare has given rise to what I call a new "Ghettocentric" identity in which the specific class, race, and gendered experiences in late capitalist urban centers coalesce to create a new identity—"Nigga" (208-209).

Even though he is focusing on gangsta rap as it appears in the postindustrial West Coast, Kelley's conception of the "ghettocentric" is nonetheless relevant to other regional locales. Virtually writing at the same time as Kelley, Tricia Rose states: "Rappers' emphasis on posses and neighborhoods has brought the ghetto back into the public consciousness. It satisfies poor

young black people's profound need to have their territories acknowledged, recognized, and celebrated. These are the street corners and neighborhoods that usually serve as lurid backdrops for street crimes on the nightly news" (1994, 11). Finally, Eithne Quinn argues that the term "ghettocentric" as an identity "provided an expressive response to the deindustrialization, rightwing politics, and market liberalization that had been draining away productive resources from America's urban centers since the 1970s" (3). Kelley, Rose, and Quinn all assert that incorporating the ghetto as a circuit of complexity within hip hop was a way for young black artists to take the cityscape back into their own hands. With these scholars in mind, I maintain that more than identifying as ghettocentric in their responses to the external American society, gangsta rap acts such as Master P are also speaking internally to ghetto communities who are in need of something to hold on to while living through the deteriorating conditions that Kelley describes. As such, ghetto culture is more than a response to the urban crisis; it's a way of life that moves black communities into productive ways of making meaning out of their lived experience.

My analysis in this chapter demonstrates that Master P is interested in sociopolitical engagement even though a predominant criticism of hip hop is that it is offensive, inappropriate, misogynistic, and portrays black people in a bad light because of its violent representations and vulgar language. While much of hip hop does indeed discuss violence, it is not without reason. Master P's work details a ghettoscape overwrought with violence in a way that is reflective of the systemic aspects of black spatial disenfranchisement. Hip hop, as an art form that grew out of an urban landscape in a historical moment when black communities were under threat of the War on Drugs, has no choice but to reflect that landscape and what it means for the black underclass. In suggesting that black Americans will probably never be liberated from the ghetto, hip hop

artists in the later twentieth century often represent the ghettoscape as a trap. They understand that black immobility is not a consequence of black people's lack of potential to overcome poverty; rather, the government has been instrumental in manipulating policy and procedure to prevent black upward mobility. In many ways, then, while migration in the interwar period promised socioeconomic advancement, black migrants were "trapped" into underpaid labor and poor living conditions.

Including gangsta rap within a literary analysis of the black American ghetto shows how the ghetto transformed from a physical space to a culture and it allows us to see what the black oppressed have made of disenfranchisement. Because I focus on Master P and not other artists signed to No Limit Records, this analysis does not take into account the varied performances and perspectives across gender that also exists within such female rappers as Mia X and Mercedes. Both of these rappers—especially Mia X—exude the same type of gangsta performance as Master P along the lines of crime and the drug trade, but they also provide useful ways to think about motherhood, womanhood, and female sexuality within such discourse. Furthermore, while this study could also contain analyses of visual culture and performance, I focus on Master P's lyrics as a way of underscoring the importance of music and language. My investigation of Master P's contribution to ghetto culture as a product of the crack epidemic engenders a new thinking of gangsta rap as a genre that is not solely focused on the hypermasculine, the hyperviolent, and the hypersexual. While these qualities are still present in his music, Master P also exhibits a vulnerability that is unique for gangsta rap at the time because of how he addresses the socioeconomic plight that drives ghetto dwellers to participate in the drug trade.

The Dirty Dance Drug Trade

Master P's ghettoscape represents the era of the urban crisis in which black youth were living in the shadows of the 1960s uprisings while crack was being ushered into working class black communities at alarming rates. My analysis of his lyrics yields that Master P depicts a ghetto that has been so under-resourced and socioeconomically exploited that its residents resort to unthinkable means of violence and exploitation themselves in order to maintain some sort of sustaining livelihood. As I demonstrated in my discussion of Donald Goines, post-uprising literature of the 1970s depicts ghetto dwellers' use of self-defense against the state in attempting to regain control of black space. In channels such as literature, music, and film, artists from this period put forth the notion that the black underclass could be in defense of their residential space, as opposed to remaining passive to residential segregation and consequential socioeconomic disenfranchisement. In Master P's music, we see how cocaine use featured in Goines's 1970s fiction evolved into a crack epidemic that had an even more negatively profound effect on working class black communities in the 1990s. As with many of Goines's characters who participated in the drug trade as an easy means of earning money, Master P empathetically shows the damaging effects done to an individual subject. In this way, his music provides outreach on an individual level to listeners who may experience loneliness or the same types of anxieties as his lyrics portray. Whereas Donald Goines offers a fictional ghettoscape through the hyperviolent, Master P's representation of the ghettoscape is meant to showcase real images and narratives of ghetto life. More than urban fiction from the 1970s, gangsta rap is about presenting narratives through notions of how real situations and conditions are and can be in the ghetto, no matter to what extent the details are fictionalized. As Imani Perry indicates, "While the music bursts with sociopolitical themes, it is quite dangerous for the critic or listener to interpret it purely as a reflection of social and political conditions, without thought to the presence of artistic

choice in every narrative and composition. Purely social scientific interpretations limit analyses and tend toward reductionism" (39). Though my analysis of Master P here concerns his engagement with sociopolitical matters, I use Perry's argument to emphasize the importance of acknowledging that rappers are also artists who create worlds and fictional details in the same ways that writers do. For this reason, I read Master P's songs as ghetto narratives rather than as purely documentary accounts of his lived experiences. Though some songs contain details that are true to his life, reading his lyrics as completely factual details runs the risk of reading the ghetto in the same ways that social scientists use pathology to study deviancy. For me, "the real" in Master P's hip hop is not so much about actual autobiographical details—though these do appear—but about witnessing and testifying to everyday struggle and everyday success in surviving the problems presented by ghetto life.

Master P's music provides various glances into a ghettoscape as a trap for the black underclass, a theme which he develops throughout the entire decade of the 1990s. His song, "Rollin' Thru My Hood" (*99 Ways to Die*, 1995), serves as an introduction to ghetto life in his native New Orleans. The refrain of "Rollin through my hood, rollin through my hood/That is what I see when I'm rollin through my hood," takes readers on a sonic tour of the speaker's environment, making the narrative seem all the more real through specific sketches and images. In this scenario, Master P discusses rampant death rates and a distrust of everyone, including his romantic partners:

> And when I said the ghetto's trying to kill me, feel this
> Cause in my hood, it's rest in peace shirt
> And every nigga and they momma done did dirt
> Or formed a gang, or even gang banged

Or slang dope, motherfucker it's the same thang

Cause where I'm from you got to watch your back

Cause every nigga in the town got a gat

But mind your own motherfucker and it's like that

In this first verse, the ghetto is established as a combination of factors that contribute to one's downfall. From the onset, the environment is represented as a death trap in and of itself, positioning everyone inside it as bound for death in some unfortunate way or another. Death thus predetermines the speaker's every motive and thought. Master P illuminates ghetto iconography by bringing to the forefront the memorial t-shirt that is emblematic of the 1990s for many black communities. Usually white and short sleeved, the memorial t-shirt carried a picture of the deceased, their name, dates of life, and sometimes a quote—all positioned under R.I.P., or Rest in Peace. As the rise in death rates among black youth due to street violence grew in this era, friends and family who were left to mourn created memorial t-shirts as a way to remember their loved ones. Nevertheless, what's most noteworthy here is how keen the rapper is on mentioning that the economies of the street are not limited to youth. Because he describes ghetto life as a daily struggle for everyone, he states that adults are not exempt from resorting to illicit activity as a means of survival. Likewise, in stating that no crime weighs more than another, Miller equalizes gangbanging with dealing drugs because both require caution in navigating the everyday urban landscape where guns are readily available and revenge lurks. As he explains, navigating the streets with caution is crucial to surviving the ghettoscape. In a sense, this introduction already details one's end—a fear of gun violence is socially instilled in the minds of ghetto dwellers to the extent that it causes people to fear each other.

Songs such as “Rollin’ Thru My Hood” detail how difficult it is to wrestle the problems of the crack epidemic from late-twentieth century analyses of black residential space and black urban life. The drug trade is so integral to Master P’s representation of the ghetto that he conceptualizes it in his music through notions of the everyday. For example, on *Ice Cream Man* (1996), his first RIAA-certified platinum album, Master P employs novelty ice cream as an extended metaphor for the production and selling of crack. He likens the white nature of the narcotic to vanilla ice cream and personifies a drug dealer as an ice cream man in the process of distributing his product to the neighborhood. The images that the rapper paints about how easy this process is bring attention to how common conversations about drug use and drug dealing are in black communities in the early 1990s. In the title track’s music video, the rapper is even seen giving ice cream to children, reinforcing how youth are easy targets to recruit into the illegal business and how they are also vulnerable to developing addictions of their own because of the environment in which they live. Master P shows that drug dealers are not likely to be concerned with addiction for it is the very thing that keeps them in business. For example, in “Time to Check My Crack House,” the speaker boasts about exploiting drug addicts, feeding off their cravings for his own financial gain. The song takes listeners into the quotidian affairs of drug dealing as the speaker ensures that his product and the money from his drug distributers are all accounted for. His workers or his customers who are short with his money meet a fateful end, as evident by his warning: “But if you come up short/There's gonna be some shit up in my city.” The straightforwardness in the delivery of these two songs indicates how drugs and violence are intertwined in such a way that their presence within the space is unquestioned. In songs like these, Master P’s discussion of drugs and violence demonstrates how working class blacks make

use of the resources given to them in order to get ahead, even if these resources have negative consequences for them, their families, and their communities.

Master P's dissection of the crack house thus gives insight into the complexities of both belonging to the ghetto and working against neighbors for one's own individual needs. This is seen in the beginning and end of "Time to Check My Crack House," both of which sample *New Jack City* (1991), a film that chronicles a black drug lord in Harlem at the height of the crack epidemic. In the particular scene sampled, Nino (the drug lord) toasts his comrades around the table at a lavish restaurant. He asks them, "Am I my brother's keeper?" to which they answer, "Yes, I am!" The call and response is taken from a verse in the Bible (I Corinthians 6:9) that refers to protecting and having the best interests of one's kinfolk. Nino uses the Biblical verse to create a sense of loyalty among those working for his underground drug ring. Towards the end of the movie, the phrase appears again as he executes one of these very people who broke bread with him. Master P's sampling of the earlier chant in the film creates a dissonance between the quote's meaning and his song's message. Like what happens in *New Jack City*, the speaker in "Time to Check My Crack House" is ultimately more concerned with ensuring that his own financial needs are met than with considering how his profit contributes to a cycle of addiction and poverty in his community. Though the sample and the song don't seem to run concurrent with each other, Master P uncovers the private and public fissures that the crack industry imposed upon black communities and black families. The sample is both prologue and epilogue, undercutting the speaker's raw confessions of "Leavin fiends on the ground/Face down like dummies." In this case, the speaker is not his brother's keeper, but is instead attracted to the crack house for the money that he can turn. As it so happens, the language of profit and monetary gain is the only language the speaker can comprehend: "Put my dope in the baggies, I mean the

bundle up/Dollar bills in my fuckin pocket tightly crumbled up/50's in my mouth got my goddamn tongue." As he explains that his mouth is figuratively possessed by drug money, the speaker conceptualizes the crack house as a profit-driven venture rather than a breeding den of addiction. Money is the only language he speaks.

By taking listeners inside the crack house, Master P brings the ghetto from the street to the interior, developing the ghetto as an all-encompassing trap designed by the state. The no nonsense, money-driven rules laid out by the drug dealer on "Time to Check My Crack House" indicate that both the supplier and the supplied are trapped by the influences of the drug trade. Dimitri A. Bogazianos touches on this notion, arguing that black youth feel that their life is out of their control because they are systematically recruited to participate in a system of regulated, lethal violence as they continuously provide labor for a drug market they did not create (96). Where the dealer is trapped in this fashion, the crack addict is consequentially manipulated by such easy access to a harmful supply and the lack of resources to combat its addictive nature. This same sentiment is expressed on "The Ghetto's Got Me Trapped" (*MP da Last Don*, 1998), where even before we hear the rapper's voice, a circus announcer declares: "You fell into my trap. Why don't you go ahead and destroy yourselves, you fucking little monkeys." In this racially-charged introduction, Master P already positions the ghetto as socioeconomically deficient and dominated by the hegemonic power of whiteness.

Building on Dyson's claim that the government turned a blind eye to drug trafficking and on Bogazianos's thorough analysis of how strict state-instituted penal codes criminalized those that used the system to their advantage, I argue that both of these claims factor the state as a major stakeholder in perpetuating the persistence of poverty in black communities. Similarly, Elizabeth Hinton has noted how certain laws also ensured that police departments could use

seized drug money in their own budgets, thus profiting from the labor of black communities (312-313). Master P picks up on the criminal justice system in his song, specifically saying: "Found me on the street corner hanging with the big niggas/Playing football in the ghetto we call it flea flicker/And ain't no rules cause niggas get shot/And every fucking day niggas running from the cops." Again invoking the everyday through sports, Master P uses football as a metaphor for how drug dealers evade criminal prosecution through learned skills and tactics. He also develops this touch-and-go game with law enforcement on "Never Ending Game" (*Ice Cream Man*, 1996), where he states:

> Most niggas out there in the hood, trying to get a chicken
>
> But never even seen a bird
>
> They die for that cain and that weed and they water
>
> And they too fucking high, to see the enemy
>
> Niggas that pretend to be, fools don't come close to me
>
> Your best friend will kill you
>
> I'm from that 3rd Ward, Caliope Projects
>
> Where they peel your caps like bananas
>
> Police trying to stand on them buildings with them radars and scanners
>
> But they can't stop the murders
>
> That's happening in my hood motherfuckers
>
> Cause everybody study capping in this
>
> Everyday, all day niggas dying

With Master P's rhythmic New Orleans accent and timbre glossed over a smooth beat, the speaker presents a host of characters: the drug dealer, those who are against the dealer, drug

addicts, and the police. Where he again addresses how easy it is to own and use a gun, he also draws attention to how poverty motivates ghetto dwellers to contribute to street crime in order to try to get ahead. Though the boastfulness of the verse's delivery positions the speaker as triumphant for evading both criminalization by the law and death by other drug dealers, the physical position of the police at the top of buildings situates the state as overlooking the disturbing institution of the ghetto and that of the crack economy that it has created. As such, Master P bears witness not only to state participation, but also to the extent to which the state allowed drugs to run rampantly through black communities as if they were playgrounds for animals. This is what he means when he says that addicts who are too high—due to the state's disinterest in black life—cannot identify the state as the focal cause of their disenfranchisement. For Master P, the manner in which the state does not have a hold on the crack economy is telling of how legislation, criminalization, and policing are not meant for the betterment of black communities.

As hip hop has never shied away from voicing disdain for racist governance, Master P more directly points to the racial inequality that blacks endure. In "99 Ways to Die" (*99 Ways to Die*, 1995), he says: "Black-on-black crimes it's all about the dividends/The government fed dope to my hood to make us kill again/Fake D.A., feds on my fuckin case." Where elsewhere he advises black communities to cease "black on black crime," a term that has been used to blame blacks for killing each other rather than understanding the root causes of systemic poverty that contribute to these actions, in this song the rapper is more attentive to the ways in which crime in marginalized areas is often a consequence of a faulty government. The juxtaposition of these lines reverts attention to the systems of power that exploit the black underclass. In this case, the speaker's mention of the federal government's involvement in introducing crack to black

communities is the source of black death, rather than blacks themselves. Shortly afterwards, he declares, “I'm out on 50 g's and that's real/And the sucka that snitched on the P, got his cap peeled.” The power behind his criticism of the government comes just before he alludes to his own participation in the trap laid out for him. This paradox furthers Master P’s overarching message that the black underclass is pushed to participate in illegal activity as a survival mechanism, but it also shows how the government plays a big part in hip hop’s preoccupation with death. In the “Hands of Dead Man,” he claims:

> But ain't nobody tripping on the black man
>
> You either learn to dope deal or you gang bang
>
> See in the ghetto a life don't mean shit
>
> And most blacks they don't know about politics
>
> And once you marked for death then your ass is smoked
>
> Cause niggas dying young in the ghetto
>
> Gang banging that can get you 40 to life
>
> So choose your casket red, blue or white
>
> And once you gone ain't no motherfucking coming back
>
> The way you live is the way you gone die, black

More than in other songs, here the speaker expresses a hopelessness that is rooted in experiences of racial discrimination and systemic racism. Citing race as the chief reason why black men have been left to fester in cycles of poverty and fall victim to the criminal justice system, Master P again situates the ghetto as a place in which black death is not only expected but rather imperceptibly encouraged by the state. He takes up civic disregard for black life in drawing the image of coffins that reflect the color of the American flag, signaling that the American

enterprise of anti-black capitalism is at the crux of the ghetto's longevity. This image explains that blacks are left out of the body politic. It simultaneously points to the deceased's citizenship, which is undercut in the following lines when the speaker announces that race is the ultimate determinant in how the state is unempathetic to black death in spite of black Americans' national belonging and rights to protection. Thus, it becomes clear that even though the speaker declares "They killed my celly/Have you ever held the hands of a dead man" at the end of the track, these hands are not actually his cellmate's, but his own.

In his lyrics, Master P exudes a keen sense of social death that I argue is tied to his preoccupation with the ghetto as a trap under the jurisdiction of the crack economy. As such, ghetto dwellers are socially dead under a regime they did not create and from which they rarely reap substantial benefits or advances toward upward mobility. Michael P. Jeffries has commented on the way in which the trope of "the thug" in hip hop embodies Orlando Patterson's case study of social death, which states that under the American brand of slavery, people of African descent were seen as outsiders or intruders to American society. As the power of whiteness rendered them as property rather than humans, the enslaved were denied integral entry into community. Jeffries continues:

> As Patterson explains, "The essence of slavery is that the slave, in his social death, lives on the margin between community and chaos, life and death, the sacred and the secular. Already dead, he lives outside the manna of the gods and can cross the boundaries with social and supernatural impunity." While poor African Americans in the hyperghetto/carceral state are not slaves and contemporary American society is not a caste or slave society, like the slave, the imagined black criminal from the hyperghetto/prison lives on the margins of

> legitimate society. At best, he is weakly attached to the labor market. His civil rights are frequently violated or denied by police who stop, search, and brutalize without just cause and by employers, educators, realtors, and everyday civilians who discriminate based on demeanors or aesthetics that supposedly signal danger. (88)

Echoing my argument throughout this dissertation, Jeffries's comments indicate how much of black disenfranchisement is connected to labor markets where black workers produce capital but do not reap the benefits of that capital. While many gangsta rap acts are more concerned with highlighting the vices perpetuated by the individual, Master P explains how drug dealers attempt to get ahead financially even though all ghetto dwellers are constrained by a lethal economy. According to Jeffries's analysis, the drug dealer is in so many words a socially dead slave because he or she is in pursuit of a socioeconomic goal that will possibly never be attained because of the subordinate social standing. In this way, the narrative in "Time to Check My Crack House" makes sense, as the drug dealer is so socially dead that he is unsympathetic to the way in which his livelihood is predicated on an addict's eventual and actual death. One can argue that the crack economy is representative of the institution of slavery in Patterson's work because it is a profit-driven system that depends on both labor of and consumption by poor and working class blacks, as indicated by Bogazianos and Hinton.

Furthermore, by conceptualizing the ghetto as a trap that leads to widespread social death, Master P portrays crack as maintaining a chokehold over the black underclass by establishing himself and other youths as death-bound subjects. Abdul JanMohamed describes the death-bound subject as one "who is formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death" (2). As black communities became havens for substance addiction and gun

violence, gangsta rappers and other hip hop artists capitalized on how the fear associated with living in such areas is infused within the psyches of ghetto residents. For this reason, the gangsta rapper often depicts the prevalence of violence in the ghetto by stating that they never know when they'll be the next victim of gun violence themselves. Nevertheless, as suggested by the title of Master P's album *99 Ways to Die*, there is a multitude of ways in which death impedes upon ghetto dwellers, including retaliatory violence, drug addiction, and police brutality. This is most obvious in the title track of *The Ghettos Tryin to Kill Me* (1994), where the speaker explains that his life in the drug economy is consistently plagued by thoughts of others trying to kill him.

Much of Master P's framing of the death-bound subject is experienced through an anxiety about mistrust and being murdered. Part of the way in which the crack epidemic changed the landscape of hip hop is that it initiated discussions of anxiety around death and dying. For as much as Master P normalizes the financial gain and gun violence involved in the drug economy, he is also cognizant that the industry has a profound effect on one's mental state. More than providing a lens to view the social conditions of black ghetto life, his music takes listeners into the psyche of his speakers. Even within the genre of gangsta rap where bravado is essential, he is blatant about the paranoia that comes with the gangsta lifestyle. Songs such as "The Ghettos Tryin' To Kill Me!" and "Ice Cream Man" break open a space for Master P to locate the hazards of a profession that he feels chose him instead of the reverse. They are complements to songs that glorify gun violence and profiting from the drug habits of his neighbors, providing another side of a narrative that seems self-destructive for both the individual and his community. So, while "Ice Cream Man" is a catchy tune in which the speaker is candid about producing and

selling his product, Master P shows that it is difficult to sustain that life without some type of motivating fear. As he articulates:

> Going crazy in the ghetto tryin to kill me
>
> My little homies lost life, y'all fools feel me
>
> I pack a D cause I'm paranoid at night time
>
> Brother be pulling jack, I'm in the hood busting gangsta rhymes
>
> And still gotta watch my back in the hood, G
>
> Like Spice, I said those fools living like movies
>
> Little kids get bout it, I mean my hood is rowdy
>
> I'm try to make a dollar fifty before I'm up and out it

The speaker states that even before a drug dealer thinks about going out to sell his product, he has to mentally prepare for the unexpected. With death as a primary concern, he recalls those he knew who met their end by similar avenues of street life. Because of these experiences, his paranoia is directed at everyone he encounters, even children who can be coopted into gang warfare at any moment. His distrust of those around him extends so far that even in his own home he feels unsafe if he is not armed. Like those with whom he is preoccupied, the speaker straps himself with a "D," or firearm, that has no restrictions. For the speaker, such behavior is comparable to that found in movies—it seems so farfetched that people would use firearms so recklessly. Nevertheless, and ever-thinking about the financial profit, the speaker is still also apt to risk his life for his street hustle. This is the gangsta life with which Master P's music is preoccupied—the subject that must turn a profit—"a dollar fifty"—at any cost. Likewise, in the title track to *The Ghettos Tryin' To Kill Me!*, he says: "But in reality I guess I damn lost it all/Just the other day I put my brother's name on the wall/Rest in peace, yeah they killed him, G/I know

one day somebody is going to try to kill the P/And if they do I guess it was my time to go." Again, it's apparent that the speaker is determining how close death is to him based on how many people close to him have died. In this way, he expects death without questioning the motives for his murder or, more importantly, without trying to prevent it.

To understand the extent to which rappers conceive of the death-bound subject, one need only look to the album cover of The Notorious B.I.G.'s *Ready to Die* (1994), which shows a shirtless young black baby boy sitting upright before a white background. The image and the title work together to convey the sense that instead of looking forward to living a fulfilling life that is usually associated with birth, blacks are born with the immediate threat of death. That same year, Master P released *The Ghettos Tryin to Kill Me*, whose title also reflects the way in which many hazardous environmental factors play a collective role in bringing about the fate of the black subject in the ghetto. Included on that album is "Bastard Child," where the speaker discusses being left behind by his parents and having to fend for himself on the street because his grandmother didn't have enough money to take care of all the children left in her care. Similar to The Notorious B.I.G.'s album cover, the song opens with the sound of a baby crying before the start of a chorus about being abandoned. The speaker puts himself through extraordinary measures just to survive, as he relays to listeners: "No one to turn to so I'm out there slanging crack/Keeps the giggety giggety nine up in my booksack/And if I die today or tomorrow I guess I'm out of luck/A bastard child all alone so I'm stuck." This song stands out in Master P's discography as a track that is from the perspective of a very young person. Where the speaker should be concerned with his studies, the lyrics indicate that a gun—"the giggety giggety nine"—instead replaces the books in his school bag. Thus, the intellectual focus here is learning to be street smart rather than book smart. Even after listeners learn, later in the song, that his

mother and his babysitter were on drugs and unable to properly care for him, the speaker still insists that "my role models was the dealers and thugs of deadbeats." This song captures the totality of Master P's representation of the death-bound subject. From the baby featured in the beginning of the track to the speaker's narrative about how he became a drug dealer, the song gives the impression of an autobiography in which one man's short life in the ghetto is riddled with death.

The Ghetto Memorial

The ghetto's cycles of entrapment come to a head in Master P's depiction of death and fate. Whereas death and mortality are common themes in hip hop music of the 1990s, they appear on at least three of Master P's albums from this period in musical tributes to victims of street violence. These tributes most likely began as a way to memorialize his brother, whom he lost to gun violence at a young age and is mentioned in many of his songs. Because of this and many other personal connections to death, Master P has reflected deeply on the roots and implications of the violence that saturates the ghettoscape. As I will demonstrate, Master P's gangsta rap remains groundbreaking in that it not only memorializes the deceased; it also works to reverse McCann's notion of the mark of criminality. These songs, which I call ghetto memorials, are some of Master P's most autobiographical tracks because they carry with them the memory of people he actually knew, whether in New Orleans or California. The multiple memorials that appear in his discography are indicative of how much the crack epidemic exposed black youth to death. Still, for the most part, hip hop artists in the 1990s were preoccupied with representing death as a personal journey—often immortalizing themselves or envisioning their own deaths. As Michael Eric Dyson explains:

> By detailing the horrors that enclosed the lives of their fallen friends, rap music helps to chronicle the social pathologies that grow inside the body politic and that claim black and brown lives with unacceptable regularity. But the gesture of examination is also one of self-protection: It secures the place of recent ancestors in the urban cosmology by giving them their just due. In so doing, survivors extend their lives, blessed by the memory of late comrades who intercede with the powers that be on their behalf. That is why postmortem poetry in the form of eulogy and mourning song is so powerful: It captures the collective grief of a hurting generation and bears witness to persistent terrors for survivors. (228)

Michael Jeffries also asserts that in addition to this music providing a form of self-protection, "it is empathetic and evidence of a caretaking ethic among those who rap about death. Through shouting out the names of the deceased, rappers care for the dead, placing them among the stars and aiding them in their afterlife" (109). Both Dyson and Jeffries are pointing to the ways in which hip hop artists construct the afterlife as an extension of caretaking for both the deceased and the living. While both of these scholars are conceptualizing death of the thug in the works of Tupac and other rappers in the mid to late 1990s, I argue that their analyses may also extend to the treatment of death in gangsta rap earlier in the decade. I agree with both assertions, but I also argue that Master P's ghetto memorials allow for a new understanding of death in gangsta rap that specifically underscores the humanity of the deceased who have simply been labeled as poverty-stricken menaces to society. The ghetto memorial highlights the social pathologies that perpetuate black death, as Dyson suggests, but I contend that the ghetto memorial is also a cultural production that helps communities move on amidst the discouraging conditions of the ghetto that render that black body insignificant to the state.

I call Master P's tribute songs "ghetto memorials" because of their specificity—they are personal but also attend to the sociopolitical devastation of black urban space. Their emotional nature lays bare a vulnerability not often found in gangsta rap, rendering it a space for truth telling that is not adulterated by problematic hypermasculinity. Joseph Winters has noted the ways in which hip hop creates spaces like these by connecting them to a tradition of sorrow songs. Framing his argument after W. E. B. Du Bois's renowned discussion of the sorrow songs in his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1902), Winters writes:

> According to Du Bois, the sorrow songs enabled a disempowered people to express loss and disappointment as well as hope for a better world. This dynamic between mourning and hope, I have argued, can be heard in hip hop, inviting us to pay more attention to themes such as vulnerability, loss, and suffering within this genre. If lament can be directed toward bodies that have been excluded, alienated, and persecuted by race-inflected hierarchies and patterns of power, then lament can also be directed toward African American cultural resources that have been integrated into the status quo. (19)

Winters bases his arguments on the works of such figures as Grandmaster Flash, Ghostface Killah, Jay Z, and Nas—skipping over the gangsta rap period. If sorrow songs allow us to experience the loss and suffering of black people, Master P's ghetto memorials also permit us to witness the harrowing conditions and lack of resources in areas that black people have been left to call home within the cityscape. As such, the ghetto memorial pays homage to the physical black body and the structural body of the ghetto that encapsulates it. Within this dialectic, the ghetto memorial uplifts the humanity of the deceased and therefore provides a sonic space for

black youth to collectively mourn and consider the ways that ghetto life has been susceptible to depleting emotional sentiments of loss and grief.

Where many gangsta rap artists focused on the celebrations of violence and the underground drug economy, Master P offers a self-reflective space to consider how the lives of black community members are affected by these activities on a practical level. By memorializing the deceased and emphasizing the actual violence that is occurring on city streets in real time, Master P uses the ghetto memorial to pay homage to those lost to street violence in such a way that reverts their lifetimes to ghetto legacies rather than simply lost lives. As legacies, the lives of the deceased are rendered valuable rather than inconsequential. Thus, Master P takes up McCann's mark of criminality in an unprecedented fashion—he reworks how the black criminal legacy is remembered after death. Combating the way that black death is often reported in the media through descriptors of negative images, Master P reconfigures the narrative of criminality amongst urban black youths in creating a rhetoric that places value on black urban life where society suggests there is none. Most notably, on the final track on *Ice Cream Man* (1999), "My Ghetto Heroes," he dismisses the idea of looking up to presidents or sports figures such as Mike Tyson and Muhammad Ali. Instead, he proclaims: "My heroes is niggas in the ghetto that slang D." As he goes on to list those lost to street violence, Master P is keen on pointing out that these people should be recognized for trying to make a way out of no way. Similarly, in "My Ghetto Heroes," he puts names to those included within the high death rate of black youth, most especially in New Orleans:

> But most of my homies they done died over drug money
> Like Bizzy Bob and Sam Skutty, but I still love em
> Air full of motherfucker and I still wanna hug em

Big Dave, my nigga gone to the battle field

Dandon and Levi, damn guard ya grill

Cause where ya goin you gotta watch your back

Judge, goddamn another nigga didn't make it back

My lil brother Kevin Miller, may he rest in peace

Elbraud, Nextditch, and Big Leaf

Lil Girl and Boo and Anguard

Big Pepper, goddamn what y'all thinking about

They gone, I mean they soldiers

But that's the type of cat I live up and hold to

While Master P emphasizes that the friends that he lists are indeed gone, he corrects himself in the middle of this verse to remind readers that the deceased are soldiers, indicating that they fought for their lives and the lives of others and are worthy of formal recognition and memorialization. Amidst the harsh realities and roll calling portrayed in the song, the most powerful lyric almost goes unnoticed: "Air full of motherfucker and I still wanna hug em." He conceives of air in two different ways here—it marks the mortality of the deceased while also signifying how plentiful the afterlife is with his friends. The lyric thus indicates that the deceased are always with the living, though he can't necessarily feel their physical presence as he wishes. Whereas gangsta rap is a hypermasculine and hyperheterosexual space, emotional sentiments—especially between men—are often limited or presented in a way so as to not to spill over into the realm of queer sexuality. Master P forgoes this rigid structure of gender performance by expressing the urge to embrace his loved loves, a physical act of affection that is an overt retention of human worthiness. Moreover, his insistence on naming the deceased is an act of

empowerment and consciousness raising by driving home the reality of socioeconomic disenfranchisement. More than a sorrow song, the ghetto memorial displays the specific faces of the victims it commemorates.

Similar to the ways in which Master P describes the anxiety caused by drug dealing, he uses the ghetto memorial to relate to others who may feel pressured to conform to the constraints of the crack industry that has been imposed on the ghetto. In these songs, he explicitly warns against conceiving of the drug trade as an easy route to fast cash by proclaiming that the fast life of crime is only for those who can handle its physical and mental stipulations. In "My Ghetto Heroes," he continues:

> And y'all other niggas that's still livin
>
> That wanna be a hero but can't be givin
>
> Yo life up for these streets
>
> But this goin out to my homies out there slangin D
>
> That still hustlin in the game tryin to make it
>
> But yall niggas better realize you can't fake it
>
> You either in or out ain't no halfway in
>
> Cause when you die in the end you go to the pen
>
> And it's realer than you real niggas feel me
>
> This for my niggas that are heroes in my hood, G

Here, he departs from the pose of authenticity and bold boasting found on his other tracks in order to seriously impart a message to readers. The somber mood of the music denotes that Master P isn't attempting to disparage those who cannot live up to the demands of the street, for he doesn't convey the sense that he can do so, either. Rather, he uses the ghetto memorial to

deliberately create a level of equality between listeners and himself, the gangsta rapper. Though he is speaking as someone who escaped many of the trials that those listed in the memorials succumbed to, by breaking down his gangsta bravado, Master P gives listeners power to reconsider how they let the social dynamics of poverty negatively influence their outlook on life. Indicating that "it's realer than you," Master P offers listeners a chance to reevaluate their own subject position in ways that are often not allowed for black youth already susceptible to poverty's influence to join gangs, the drug trade, and other forms of vice. The lyric testifies that the anti-blackness is an epidemic centered in black communities in more nuanced ways than is apparent on the surface. Thus, in recognizing the value of the lives that were lost to street violence, the ghetto memorial also counteracts the social death running rampant in the ghetto.

Ghetto Culture

In the closing remarks to "Rollin' Thru My Hood," Master P declares, "It's a ghetto thang, ghetto thang, ghetto thang/And if you ain't from the ghetto you wouldn't understand." This line at once draws in listeners who can identify with the life he describes and creates a distance from any desire to change or hide any aspect of ghetto life. Yet, what Master P is also getting at is that there are shared meanings between ghetto dwellers that are for the most part unknown to those who live outside of the ghetto. Here, he is hinting toward a ghetto culture that ghetto dwellers assume through collective consciousness and shared lived experiences. In Southern gangsta rap, ghetto culture is motivated by the need to make meaning out of a lived situation that is structurally mandated by the state to retain working class and poor blacks within generational cycles of poverty. I have explained how Master P portrays the black American ghetto within gangsta rap through lyrical depictions of the drug trade, social death, and ghetto memorials for

those who have died as a result of the urban crack-inflicted wars in black working class residential areas. As he points to the socioeconomic ramifications that the crack epidemic unleashed on black communities in the 1990s, Master P conceives of a ghetto culture that is invested in providing places of mourning and solidarity for blacks who have nonetheless been denied a status of worthy humanity. Analyzing ghetto culture from the perspective of gangsta rap gives us the opportunity to reflect on how ghetto dwellers remain introspective in creating ways to cope with life on the socioeconomic margins via cultural productions. Where many scholars who approach culture in black urban life do so with sociological or anthropological methods for understanding social problems, I employ textual analysis to study meaning making rather than behavioral patterns or social trends.

Where Master P indicates that much of ghetto life is about finding a way out of no way, the cultural significance of the ghetto memorial is that it makes meaning of systematic black death by providing a way for the black underclass to focus on more than struggle and take time to acknowledge the humanity found within their community. Thus, ghetto culture is a system of survival, but also a means by which the black underclass creates a knowledge production that allows for unique ways of manipulating language, reformulating familial connections, and rearticulating modes of hegemony. Master P's lyrical representations of the black American ghetto within gangsta rap cultivate a ghetto culture that is invested in surviving the socioeconomic destruction that the crack epidemic wreaked on black residential areas. Given the many ways in which Master P purposefully addresses the ghetto or speaks about it in his music, his discography becomes a vessel for ghetto dwellers to engage with in ways that are not presented to youth in their everyday lives. In this way, Master P's albums and ghetto memorials serve as cultural practices in providing spaces for ghetto dwellers to reflect on the ways in which

black lives are taken for granted by the state. Nevertheless, within that recognition there are also messages of perseverance.

Master P's music participates in a shared knowledge production of ghetto culture by producing ghetto memorials that are extensions of other cultural practices that pay tribute to fallen loved ones. In "I Miss My Homies," the speaker says, "But today's a sad day to see the t-shirt with ya face/From the cradle to the grave, from the streets we used to fall/In the park you liked to ball, put yo name upon the wall/In the projects you's a legend on the street you was a star." The cultural attribute of signaling the lives of deceased youth in concrete measures by placing their images on the memorial t-shirts made popular in 1990s and spray painting their names on neighborhood walls signified ways to not forget the deceased. Master P further explains on "Goodbye To My Homies" that "So many homies gone, trying to ball till they fall/Now I'm left with nothing but old cards/And a bunch of pictures on the wall/RIP tattoos nigga, just to show you that we real." The act of making the legacies of the deceased permanent through everyday artifacts—shirts and walls—works to bring the deceased back to the urban terrain in which their lives ended too abruptly. Similar to flowers at a gravesite, the t-shirt and the wall painting concretize the deceased on the very terrain in which they lived and died. Furthermore, the insistence of permanence in this way "just to show you that we real," relates to the way in which the ghetto memorial works to reverse the mark of criminality. In a song that's meant for communal lamenting, Master P delivers a lyric that is also directed at those living outside of the ghetto. In so much as the mark of criminality's purpose is to delegitimate the deaths of black youths who participate in illegal activity, Master P's ghetto memorial aims to show that victims of ghetto street violence—no matter the cause or implication—are valuable people deserving of empathy.

Yet, even though the ghetto memorial contains hopeful cultural tropes, it is still a product of Master P's war-themed discography. Incorporating a military tank as his record label's logo, Master P establishes himself and his artists as soldiers in a longstanding war with sociopolitical powers that perpetuate black immobility and invest in the disenfranchisement of the ghetto. By attending to the meaning that Master P formulates with his language, I arrive back at Jesmyn Ward's usage of hip hop in her writing that I referenced at the beginning of the chapter. Her thoughts shed light on how Master P's depictions of ghetto life, references to social death, and ghetto memorial provide spaces for black youth to both reflect on their environment and a collective sense of solidarity for ways in which the ghetto and the black underclass are dejected from the body politic. Master P employs shared meaning and knowledge in producing a language for black youth to critically engage their communities and the everyday struggle of living in areas that have in so many words become war zones. In many ways, Master P framed No Limit Records based on the concept of war, which is why he calls his family and friends "soldiers" in ghetto memorials. Sharing the history on this decision on Solange's album, *A Seat at the Table* (2016), he says:

> People wanna know what "No Limit" comes from. My grandfather, Big Daddy, was in the military. And, you know, he always said, "Man, them people ain't gon' do nothing for us." So, he was like, "Grandson, you need to start your own army." And that's where the tanks and the military thing come from. See, I watched the, the Avon lady in my hood. She popped her trunk and sell her products. So I put all my CDs and cassettes in the back of my trunk and I hit every city, every hood. My grandfather, he said, 'Why you gon' call it 'No Limit'?" I said, "Because I don't have no limit to what I could do ("Interlude: No Limits").

On another track on that album, he says, “You know, I mean, they got more drugs in the rich neighborhoods than they got in the hood. A lot of their kids dying from overdosing, things like that, think about it. Black kids have to figure it out! We don't have rehabs to go to. You gotta rehab yourself. But for us, you can't pull the plug on us and tell us it's over. Not me” (“Interlude: Pedestals”). His thoughts here insinuate that the soldier mindset is in response to the systematic oppression working class black communities face by not having the adequate resources to combat issues such as drug addiction. The no limit mentality, then, is rooted in persevering against the systematic injustices inflicted on the ghetto. Moreover, while his lyrics in such songs as the previously cited “Never Ending Game” suggest that the crack epidemic transformed black communities into warzones, Master P’s image of the soldier turns the metaphor on its head. Instead of the drug dealer being at war with internal forces such as competing drug dealers, the No Limit soldier recognizes and contests the racial inequality that is deeply rooted in the state’s treatment of blacks as second-class citizens. A “no limits” ghetto culture, then, dictates that there is more to ghetto life than Master P portrays in songs like “The Ghettos Tryin' To Kill Me!” Instead, Master P’s work indicates that there is no limit to a ghetto culture that is predicated on surviving and coping with the challenges presented by the ghettoscape.

Conclusion

This study ends with discourse on ghetto culture in order to expound on the ways in which ghetto dwellers have used art as a method of survival. In this chapter, I have argued that Master P’s gangsta rap maintains a vulnerability that builds a sense of relatability with his listeners. In doing so, he presents the ghetto memorial as a lens for ghetto dwellers to work through how the crack epidemic wreaked devastation on black families and black residential

areas. By studying ghetto culture in gangsta rap, we begin to see that the ghetto endures in spite of roadblocks. Analyzing ghetto culture as possessing mechanisms such as ghetto memorials that harness the potential to help communities cope highlights how black knowledge production serves the underclass. By redirecting the mark of criminality and demonstrating how notions of social death appear in black working class areas in the 1990s, Master P provides new ways of thinking about the work of gangsta rap as beneficial rather than simply problematic and offensive.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have argued that twentieth century African American writers construct a vital literary history of the post-World War II urban crisis through their depictions of the ghetto. In their representations of black residential space, African American writers have consistently critiqued systems of power that influence black social, political, and economic immobility. By examining the ghetto in particular, I have shown that African American writers have been invested in creating works that speak to the agency of the black working class in the face of marginalization. With this vibrant history, we can work to understand the specific knowledge productions of marginal communities. The writers that I have discussed attempt to bridge that gap of understanding by drawing on the sociopolitical climate that they were part of. In using literature as a way to work through residential discrimination and anti-black policies, Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Donald Goines, and Master P capitalized on black culture in contributing to a larger conversation of black urban representation.

The foremost major claim of this dissertation is that the ghetto is not as intellectually immobile as popular rhetoric would have one believe. When I explained my dissertation to my uncle, for example, he questioned the worth of studying what he saw as a residential space overwrought with poverty and people who were complacent in living in such poverty. He didn't understand how systemic anti-blackness functioned to keep the black working class in such conditions until I explained that my research emphasizes the ways in which cultural producers have displayed that the ghetto has a history of attempting to overcome these conditions and that

ghetto dwellers have used their own knowledge productions to cope with the challenges of the ghettoscape.

If "the ghetto remains a useful concept—provided we recall its rich historical background and stop divorcing it from its past," as Mitchell Dunier suggests, then this dissertation asks how is the ghetto a useful concept (ix)? Dissecting how writers have depicted the ghetto remains useful for understanding how the black underclass have navigated systemic oppression throughout the twentieth century. In these four chapters I have constructed a literary history that explores how writers have explained that black residential space is at the nexus of civil rights for African Americans. Moreover, in centering my discussion of the urban crisis on one specific space across geographical locales, I have shown that understanding the effects of racial segregation throughout the twentieth century is central to understanding many of the underlying issues around the intersections of race and class such as welfare reform, the War on Drugs, and the War on Crime.

Still, there is one question that I have yet to answer: how do literary representations of black urban life engage with realism? In the introduction I explained how this project is working toward defining the African American urban narrative. One possible future direction for this project is to consider the ways that different iterations of realism play out in these same works that I've discussed in this dissertation. In the introduction, I argued that since the beginning of the twentieth century, a central debate concerning literary depictions of black urban life has been about the aim to reflect "true" representations of black life that are reflections of not only lived experiences, but sociological evaluations of social conditions. As shown through my earlier discussion of Alain Locke, Robert Park, Irving Howe, and Ralph Ellison, critics and social scientists had varying opinions on how much creative writers should adhere to factual lived

experiences when writing about black people. Thus, in addition to writing about the ghetto in their critiques of the urban crisis, post-World War II writers were also manipulating realism for their own uses or their texts were analyzed in such a way that suggested new forms of realist interpretations.

At stake here is that the urban experience in African American literature is based on notions of truth and validity via realism, reality, and ideas of "the real" that exist across the works of the writers represented in this project. The rise of social realism in African American literature emerged in tandem with black Southerners migrating to northern urban centers. In *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature, 1930-1953*, Stacy I. Morgan writes that the emergence of social realism grew out of a need for cultural producers to speak to bleak social conditions that stymied African American socioeconomic advancement following the World Wars and the depression era. She states, "By moving such phenomena as poverty and joblessness, racial violence, and legal injustices firmly into the scope of appropriate subject material, and by reconfiguring the notion of an artist's relationship to his or her audience, social realism gave rise to new ideologies regarding the kind of cultural work that visual art and literature could (and should) perform." (5) Furthermore, social realism as a trend in literary and visual art in the years indicated by Morgan was circulating during the same time that Locke was writing his annual literature reviews that emphasized the merits of literary realism, most especially when applied to works about black urban life.

The works of Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks without a doubt reflect the social engagement that Morgan argues drove social realism in the middle of the twentieth century. As I have demonstrated, even though Wright was influenced by social science, he was also skeptical of how that sociology was actually representative of the African American experience. Likewise,

Brooks is important for thinking through social realism because her work exists between two worlds: the social realism of the 1940s and 1950s, and the Black Arts aesthetic that was born in the 1960s. Though many have cited the era of social realism as ending in the early 1940s, Morgan's intervention extends this period to the early 1950s. This move then incorporates Brooks, but only her early poetry collections. Though I use Brooks's poetry published after 1953, I nonetheless consider these works as representative of both the social realism era and the Blacks Arts Movement. *In the Mecca* (1968) is a volume that incorporates her long standing representation of black urban life in Chicago and connects her to the younger generation of emerging Black Arts writers, whom I argue employ a more radical aesthetic to get to the root of "real" conditions. In many ways, Gwendolyn Brooks is one of the core writers of both of these eras that usher in the works of such pulp fiction and street literature writers as Donald Goines.

I am interested in how the social realism of Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks evolves into what Greg Goode has called "ghetto realism" in the works of Donald Goines. This term is complicated in and of itself because Goines's stories are not often direct snapshots of a lived experience such as the work of social realists of the 1930s to the 1950s that Morgan discusses. Nevertheless, using "ghetto realism" as an aesthetic label in the 1970s—just as Morgan cites the function of social realism in the preceding decades—indicates that the social climate of the world that Goines was writing into existence can be read as a critical examination of its time. On the cover of Goines's books, publisher Holloway House claims that critic Greg Goode stated that Goines created a new genre of fiction: ghetto realism. Kermit E. Campbell points out that the only trace of this citation is found in Goode's 1984 article, "From *Dopefiend* to *Kenyatta's Last Hit: The Angry Black Crime Novels of Donald Goines*," published in *MELUS*, the journal of the *Society for the Study of the Multi-ethnic Literature of the United States*. In the

passage where he merely hints at ghetto realism, Goode states: “Nevertheless the Goines corpus is important because it is perhaps the most sustained, realistic multifaceted, widespread fictional picture ever created by one author of the lives, activities, and frustrations of poor urban Blacks” (qtd. in Campbell 93). In a chapter on ghetto realism in fiction in *"Gettin' Our Groove On": Rhetoric, Language, and Literacy for the Hip Hop Generation*, Campbell points out that “if there is such a genre called ‘ghetto realism,’ then one will find evidence of it first in the African American oral tradition and later in the literature of Donald Goines” (95). I have no reservations about this claim, but I am more interested in Goines’s method of incorporating realism into his work, which is known for its excessive images of violence, well developed economic and social systems of illegal drugs, and hypersexuality among his black characters. Though Goines used some real situations and stories he gathered from his Detroit community, his written accounts are highly fantastical pieces of fiction. Yet, Goines’s popularity among African Americans indicates that there is something within his texts that resonates with this market, which motivates this genre’s moniker as “ghetto realism.” Though I maintain that Goines’s novels are nonetheless complex texts that grapple with the same issues as social realists (unemployment, devastating effects of drugs on black communities, inadequate housing), when we take into account that these works were produced after Moynihan’s Report (1965) we can see how they might be read as simply factual pieces of evidence that contribute to Moynihan’s claims of black backwardness and larger national claims of black criminality. Thus, a historical and analytical examination of Donald Goines’s urban fiction dictates how notions of “blackness” and “urban” become one and the same; instead of “urban” being applied to a space it automatically gets scripted as a racial code for black people who exist along the margins of society.

Finally, in order to understand hip hop's insistence on valuing "the real" it is crucial to understand the importance of the ghetto as a marginal space within hip hop's message in that it is used to combat sociological notions of blackness and black ghetto life. In "Authenticity Within Hip-Hop and Other Cultures Threatened With Assimilation" (1999) Kembrew McLeod maintains that authenticity is one of the most common tropes in hip-hop, as it is often spoken of in being "true," "real," or "keepin' it real" (166). McLeod writes: "Keepin' it real and other various other claims of authenticity do not appear to have a fixed or rigid meaning throughout the hip-hop community. Keepin' it real is a floating signifier in that its meaning changes depending on the context in which it is invoked" (168). I surmise, then, that "Keepin' it real" as a mark of authenticity grew out of the misrepresentation of black life in social science. I take McLeod's floating signifier of authenticity in much the same ways as I framed ghetto culture in my discussion of Master P—as systems of meaning making.

As a whole, this project offers a way to view the urban crisis through cultural productions of marginalized communities that were most affected by it. While research within history and social science have offered insightful discoveries concerning the origins and specifics of the urban crisis, they don't give nuanced ways of thinking through how communities survive in the face of systemic oppression in the second half of the twentieth century. As a step toward defining the post-migration urban narrative and as a study that is concerned with understanding black writers' engagements with black urban space, this dissertation not only provides a better understanding of black working class cultural productions, it also uncovers the ways in which systems work against entire communities and how those communities survive nevertheless.

Coda: Ghetto Gold

In June 2011, I was on my way to Los Angeles. Earlier that year, my computer broke. Instead of asking my parents for the hundreds of dollars I would need to buy a new one, I used the university computers to write papers and complete my assignments for my third year of college. I woke up before the sun and rode the shuttle to the library with the university employees, who were on the way to their early morning shifts at the dining halls and the hospital. In these early hours, I applied to a master's program in the Department of English at my university and was accepted, surprisingly. I would begin both my last year as an undergrad and my first semester of graduate school at the same time. That June, I borrowed money from a friend and bought a laptop. This friend walked me through the steps of navigating the airport as she drove me there. I was heading to the University of California, Los Angeles to complete a summer undergraduate research program. Although I applied, I was terrified of traveling alone. Afraid of flight, I was doing something not many people in my family did often. Before then, I had only flown twice, eleven years prior. I told this to the woman I sat next to on the plane. When we landed, she yelled at me, "Go get what you want!"

In June 2011, I was twenty-one. I was sitting on Venice Beach, worlds apart from my hometown of Savannah, Georgia. Worlds apart from my black working-class community. I was a first-generation college student. I was learning about brown rice and consuming whole collections of ZZ Packer and Tarell Alvin McCraney. I received money to study and read books. I rode buses on the hilly coast digesting Joan Didion, drowning in the California droughts I read

about in Janet Fitch in high school. I was free. I was clueless. I was black. I was southern. I was queer. I was a child from the hood walking down Sunset Boulevard. I was flying.

In June 2011, Alan died. I received this news by phone when my mother called to check up on me as I lost myself in the shelves of the UCLA library, growing smaller and bigger all at once. She said he was sitting on a porch in our neighborhood---which was around the corner from where my own family was sitting on ours. A car drove by and someone shot him, repeatedly, and then sped off. His death was the eleventh homicide in the city that year in a string of continuous murders overtaking the city. Alan's parents and mine grew up together in the same way that he and I did. Our grandparents' homes are on opposite sides of a street that spills over into a wooded area.

Alan died. I received the news from my mother and went back to study. Continued flight. For much of my elementary and middle school education, I was pinned as one of the smart students amidst the plethora of black children raised in the same neighborhood as me. I thought about the time in eighth grade when I was chosen—as the highest achieving black male—to be a subject in a news article that compared me to one of the lowest achieving black male students. The article, written by a black woman, was about the systemic forces working against black male students. The odds were against us, it said. Its central message was that neither of us was supposed to make it to college. The day the article came out, I remember rushing to the gas station to retrieve a copy. There it was, the other student's face strewn on the front cover. I thought, *why are they making him look as if he is a sad animal in a zoo?* They took pictures of him on his bed, playing with toys, walking home from a small job he kept. He was not only the subject of the inspection—his "problems" were.

Back then; I didn't know why I found the images and the angle so problematic. I actually liked the reporter and thought the article itself was important, but I couldn't get past the other student's face on the cover. Later, after years of study, traveling to and from high places back to my Savannah, I realized what sat wrong with me: pathology. The way they depicted the other student horrified me. After all, this was a kid that had no problem expressing himself. He was funny. He carried light. I'm sure he had other things operating in spite of his joy, but his troubles were the main thing driving the image on the front cover.

All that summer, I thought of Alan. I went to UCLA to study Tupac, a rapper whose work I was drawn to because of its protest aesthetics. I was interested in the power of literature to change community. Before I was accepted to graduate school, I was trying to decide which of my academic disciplines—English or Sociology—would have the most impact on the world. While the latter seemed to have more tangible change and facts, I was reminded by an adviser that the world also existed in books, film, and music. In the same way that art reflects the world, it also challenges it.

In reaching toward Tupac, I found out that several artists from his generation were influenced by Donald Goines. I had never heard of Goines but while in search of his writing, I found that I knew it intimately. It didn't seem that far off from the environment I called home. Though not as rough, the neighborhoods of my childhood had similar essences of violence, drugs, people standing on corners, and problematic discourses on welfare and black single mothers. As I was reading the Kenyatta series in the university archives, Detroit jumped off its pages and flooded my mind. I found the literary ghetto that I had known all along in the pages of other pieces of street literature that my cousin read years prior. Though he was writing in the 1970s, Goines was a part of the literary tradition of the 1990s and early 2000s that lined my

cousin's bookshelf. Moreover, his ghetto enticed me because of the varied stories and perspectives found in his books. More than implicating the sad face of my middle school classmate, Goines's ghetto was defensive. It fought back against pathology to uncover the ways that black people could take ownership of their own communities.

Returning to my home institution that fall to begin my graduate study under Lawrence Jackson, I learned more about what he calls the "indignant generation." In this group of black cultural producers between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, I discovered Gwendolyn Brooks for the second time. Though I can tell you the exact place that her *Selected Poems* could be found on the shelf at the Bull Street Public Library that I frequented as a child, I couldn't tell you what she was writing about aside from her more famous poems that I already knew. Though her verses were too advanced for me at that time, years later I discovered the importance of how she depicted Bronzeville women in the middle of the twentieth century. Having grown up with a single mother who utilized welfare funds to stock the refrigerator while I was away at college, I understood Mrs. Sallie's story. Like my grandmother, who worked in white women's homes, Mrs. Sallie was not a total victim in her narrative. As the poem is in her perspective, it details how she has been able to make a home in spite of the obstacles posed against her. This reminds me of the same ways that my grandmother has given me her own narrative after narrative throughout my upbringing and into the present. I carried these stories with me into the archives as I read Brooks's papers and discovered the original manuscript for "In the Mecca." As a critique of welfare discourse, Brooks's poem challenges the urban crisis's intent to further disrupt black women's lives. Brooks gives us ghetto gold: intent, resourcefulness, furious fervor to raise one's family.

As I worked my way through my master's program, the further I found myself engrossed in the black tradition of protest—that which sent me to UCLA. This led me back to Richard Wright, whom I discovered when my father told me to read *Native Son* many years prior, perhaps even before high school. Wright was someone who I was never able to escape, as my music teacher called me Richard Wright all throughout high school because he knew I was a writer. (Can we ever escape Wright?) This time I found him different, read with more intent. I did not know why my father had given me that book as a child. I understood it and I didn't. In graduate school, it made more sense. Much of Wright's world made sense. As the newspaper ran the story on why I wouldn't make it to college, I was reading about the socioeconomic and psychological strain that perpetuated the plight of the black working class. In reading about Bigger's experiences in the ghetto, I was encountering my own disenfranchisement. *Native Son*. 1940. The beginning of the urban crisis.

As I reached further and further back to trace black American protest, I realized that all of the work I was interested in was about more than protest. It was about the ghetto. This came to me after starting the PhD and encountering Thomas Sugrue's *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* my first year at the University of Michigan. As I prepared for my preliminary exams in my second year of the program, I learned of my uncle's chronic heart failure diagnosis. The man who taught my mother and me to drive. The military man, who drove big trucks across the country. But also, the man who had an addiction to drugs. Who lived, for much of the time I've known him, either in rehab, in jail, or at my grandmother's house. Who stole cars to fund his habit. It was not that drugs were most likely where his diagnosis originated, it's that I had known why and how drugs were such a part of my juvenile lexicon at an early age. How "crackhead" was thrown around in casual conversation as if the most natural thing in the world. Only as an

adult with significant education did I learn the socioeconomic factors at play in my uncle's addiction. It was the same addiction that I saw in Goines's novels. In spite of his setbacks, my uncle watched the History Channel all day. He said we should go to museums for summer vacations instead of amusement parks. Pure intelligence set back against the grain of black disenfranchisement. As I drove from Savannah to Atlanta where I was living, he died. I was doing just what he taught me, to move forward with my foot on the gas pedal.

In this way, the path to Master P makes the most sense. I wanted to go back to Tupac and I couldn't. On the one hand, Tupac is great because he exists on both the East and West Coast. But on the other hand, I could not leave my journey bicoastal after traveling for so long through graduate school. From Goines's Detroit to Brooks and Wright's Chicago. From conference to conference. To archives in Illinois, New York, and Connecticut. In flying for ten years, it was time to go home. Like the actual reverse migration, I had to fly South.

Though I listened to Tupac growing up, his CDs were not the ones I found stashed between car seats, spinning in neighborhood radios, or hidden amongst the gold condom rappers and pictures beneath my older cousins' mattresses. What I found in all of these places was Southern sound. It was Master P and his No Limit Army detailing the crack epidemic that was surrounding me. As a youth, I couldn't understand what I know now—that Master P's lyrics illuminated so much of the narratives that young people in my hood were accustomed to. Like my uncle's addiction, these narratives of gang banging and dope dealing were a part of the cycle of black disenfranchisement pushing my older cousin to make a way for himself in spite of our upbringing. My cousin and his friends were enticed by a ghetto culture predicated on survival that told them what they could be when newspaper articles said they could not. But the ghetto

takes no mercy. It engulfs you, leaves your face on a memorial t-shirt and a wall. ALAN WUZ HERE. HE WUZ HERE. YOU WUZ HERE.

At an early stage, this dissertation grew to this shape because of the simple phrase: "That place was kind of…ghetto." A friend had said it, a close friend. For some reason, most likely for the same reasons I am writing this afterword, I was taken aback. I immediately took "ghetto" as a code for "black." I wanted to remind him that his father owned a laundry in a very working class, black neighborhood. That one of the main reasons he grew up in the suburbs, I assumed, was through a persistent cycle of poverty that kept black people in this neighborhood from owning their own appliances. But my friend, who is nonblack, wouldn't mean something so offensive. This isn't his thought pattern. That's when I knew I had to question myself. Why would I immediately think that? What's the connection between the ghetto and black people? And more importantly: what makes something or someone descriptively ghetto? In the end, I've decided that something is ghetto not based on what it lacks, but on how it makes up for that void. The ghetto is, in and of itself, still present. It persists. People construct whole lives there. In many respects, ghetto life can be described as lack blossomed into beautiful subsistence. The ghetto isn't simple pathology. Pathology does not take into account the ways in which, in spite of death, the ghetto moves forward. This dissertation is an attempt to dissect the areas of my life that have given shape to who I am: flight instead of the rendered notion that the black working class are immobile.

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